Tarja Heino

Family Group Conference from a Child Perspective

Nordic Research Report

REPORT

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Foreword

In the past two decades a quiet revolution has been occurring in the area of child protection and welfare practice – professionals are sharing decision-making power with families. Across the world, policy and practice has shown a marked development toward more participatory practices with families of children at risk. In some countries, Aotearoa New Zealand being notable in this regard, formal involvement of families in decision-making has been enshrined in legislation. The Family Group Conference (FGC) model of practice has emerged as a significant innovation, a process that brings together the family, including the extended family, and the professional network systems in a family-led decision-making forum.

Whilst originating in Aotearoa, the FGC has been adopted in other countries as a way of operationalising notions of partnership and empowerment. As family decision-making practices have spread, countries have inevitably adapted the practice to fit their own structures, professional ideology and culture. This is important and will necessarily reflect the experience of using the model and its ongoing development.

Like New Zealand, the Nordic countries have a reputation for valuing family and the spirit of family life. The majority of our children flourish within an environment of love and support. This is not the case for all children, however. Some children depend on the work of others to keep them safe. Promoting child care and safety is a universal challenge that unites people who work with families in child welfare.

Sharing ideas is an essential human endeavour, and I am delighted to be able to say a few words about this Nordic research report. Tarja Heino has done an important job in exploring the use of the FGC across five Nordic countries. In translating the report into English she enables a wider reading of the work and gives us a privileged glimpse into Nordic cultural practice with children and families.

The research brings together five small qualitative studies that focus upon the child's perspective within the FGC process. Using a participatory action research methodology the researchers involve children in all phases of the project, encouraging the children to tell their own stories about their FGC experience. In so doing they also model, in action, the project's primary concern – the active participation of children in matters that concern them.

Their findings are both intriguing and challenging. Not surprisingly, practice varied across the five countries. Each country put together their own national report, which was then self-evaluated by each research group, and Tarja as leader of the collective Nordic research. Through a unique process of reflective analysis the researchers from each country came together and worked through the challenging issues of comparative research and finally synthesized their findings into this

Nordic report. Despite the differences in practice and approach, common themes emerged that will also resonate more broadly across international boundaries: the importance to children of family and intimate friendships; the importance of their concerns relating to school, their studies and work; and the significance of identity and a sense of self.

A key aim of the FGC is to bring family members together in an empowering process that enables everyone in the family to be heard and solutions to be found. Perhaps most revealing in this collection of Nordic studies is that a child's participation was found to be fleeting rather than central to the unfolding process of FGC practice. This is an important insight for all professionals working with children and their families. Although child care and protection work is by its nature child-oriented, decisions are often made by adults in what they consider to be the child's best interests. In this regard, practice can operate from an adult point of view, with little reference to childhood cultures and the ways in which the agency of children can be promoted in child protection practice.

This research challenges everyone working with children and their families to interrogate practice intentions when undertaking FGCs. It encourages us to think about whether FGCs are about a child's right to participate, whether its about helping families to manage their children, or whether its about using strengths-based practice to achieve both. Wherever practice positions itself, this research provides us with an important reminder that children can and will participate actively in decision-making about their care and protection, and that empowering families is also about empowering children.

Marie Connolly PhD.
Aotearoa New Zealand
February 2009

Abstract

Tarja Heino. Family Group Conference from a Child Perspective. Nordic Research Report. National Institute for Health and Welfare, Report 13/2009. Helsinki 2009. pp. 185. ISBN 978-952-245-039-5

The aims for the research project were: 1) to seek for and to develop an alternative way to explore FGC and in general, social work; 2) to strengthen the position of research focusing on the child; 3) to strengthen the position of the child and to keep the child perspective visible in practical child protection social work; 4) to create ways to establish dialogical settings and to carry out dialogues between both the Nordic researchers and between people in the practical research settings in each country. The research was carried out in a child protection context in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and in Sweden. The research questions in the national settings were: 1) What is the situation like before FGC from the child's perspective and how does it change during and after the process of FGC? 2) How do children experience FGC as a method? 3) How is a child perspective realised in FGC in practice?

The research can be characterised as participatory action research and as empowerment research belonging to the ethnographic qualitative research tradition.The national data was manifold. The researcher interviewed each child 3–4 times during the process. The follow-up time ended with the last interview one year after the first FGC. The researcher observed the children and other participants in FGC, including in its private phase. The documents generated in the FGC-process were collected. Some of the researchers produced the child's story about the changes and experiences of the child. The number of children taking part in the research was 3–10 from each country, 35 children altogether. Nearly half were younger children (aged 7–12) and the rest were adolescent (aged 13–17). The material was triangulated and analysed both case by case and in themes.

The national studies show that changes in children's life situations happen, and mostly they were for the better. Children experienced FGC mostly positively, but they also had suggestions about developing it. The private network was usually pleased to be invited in FGC, and it worked seriously for the child. A child perspective takes time to be realised in practice. The findings presented in the national reports are studied in detail in this report. Additionally, the report makes use of the discussions in the Nordic research meetings. Based on the Nordic dialogues and reflections, findings concerning the position of children in the private meetings (in the "black box") are reported. Also, as a final outcome, a research-based checklist for FGC for keeping the child in focus was produced.

The methodological challenges and interests for the study were manifold, and some conclusions could be made. The experiments with child participation

gave encouraging outcomes, and the methods can be strongly recommended for use in practical social work. Using the child's story as an analytical tool worked as such, and this kind of intervention also seemed to empower the child. By using Recalling the future-method we could make visible the child's definitions and understanding; the method worked well in the research context. In practice there is a way before fully including the child in the FGC process. Connecting research, practice and development in social work was found to be a challenging task, though not impossible. Generating a dialogical atmosphere during encounters between various parts and interests is demanding. The complexity of implementation is made visible.

Key Words: Family Group Conference, social work, child protection, child perspective, empower, participatory research, dialogue, observations, interviews, triangulation, follow up, case study, thick description, producing the child's story, narrative approach, Nordic

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Each Nordic country – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden – has carried out research on how the child perspective can be realized in the process of Family Group Conferencing. We would like to congratulate all the national and local bodies that have financed and helped the research become a reality in each country.

Without the Nordic Council of Ministers (Nordiska Ministerrådet), this work would not have been possible. We warmly thank them for the confidence they have shown. We are grateful for being able to take advantage of the continuity they have afforded us. The benefit of such a Nordic co-operation goes beyond the mere national advantages gained.

STAKES has taken care of all the practical details, the accounting and all the background arrangements. The former director general at STAKES, Vappu Taipale, opened the door for the project to present itself at the meeting of the Nordic National Social Body Management, thus allowing the project to achieve broad-based support from the beginning.

STAKES has been the base office, responsible for taking care of all the practical details and correspondence concerning both annual applications, reporting and invoicing. A warm thanks to Marja Lampola and Nina Sipiläinen, Voitto Sorvisto and especially Raija Rantamäki who was the project secretary and handled magnificently all kinds of unusual events during that time. In trying to focus thanks towards all those that have been included makes it clear that several changes have also taken place also at STAKES. The Children and Family Group has remained the base, with each group leader earning individual gratitude: Marjatta Bardy, Minna Salmi and Johanna Lammi-Taskula. Also the heads of the Welfare Result section, Sirpa Taskinen, Mikko Kautto, Jussi Simpura and Pekka Hakkarainen have supported the project. Thank you all!

We have been lucky in getting keen moral and financial support - and also in being in the right place at the right time. For the project leader, it has been a privilege to work alongside the various organisations within the Nordic arena, and to work with this theme, this research and these people. Without these people and their capacity to combine work and family life, a common exertion like this would not be possible.

In Sweden *Eva Nyberg* was the first to produce a plan and to arrange financing. *Eva-Marie Åkerlund* was an equal force in carrying out the research. The research focused on immigrant children, and theirs was the first of the national reports to reach completion. The setting in Sweden differed in some respect from the others, giving us another important perspective from which to view the results.

In Denmark, *Birgit Mortensen* was the pioneer in many respects, supported by *Jytte Hansen*. Birgit arranged the national follow-up research setting and was the

first to reach the interview stage, thereby being first to ponder questions concerning the analysis of the data. She worked hard to open the way for the rest of us, creating innovative tables and diagrams to describe, analyse and present the case results. In the Danish report the phenomenological and structural approaches to child protection were combined.

Finland is grateful to *Sarianna Reinikainen* who acted as a vice-project leader in a lively and joyful way, creating a supportive and caring atmosphere. She maintained persistent discussion about how to go about establishing the child's perspective. She reported the results very thoroughly, empathically and ethically and was effective and sensitive in producing the children's stories together with them. As a project leader, I am very grateful to Sarianna's forcefulness and flexibility.

Iceland set up the whole FGC experiment and study in a tabula rasa environment! The energetic and volcanic women, *Hervör Alma Árnadóttir* and *Freydis Freysteinsdóttir,* made the very first workshop possible, allowing the introduction of the FGC into Iceland. The three cases that went to the one-year follow-up were the first ever in Iceland – an admirable achievement!

In Norway, the researcher pair, *Cecilie Omre* and *Liv Schjelderup*, have been astonishingly productive while touring the world, with both child protection and FGC suitcases in toe. They enthusiastically began a conceptual search for Child Protection in history, philosophy, political sciences, social policy, sociology and developmental psychology. And they continue to keep dozens of things together in promoting child's position in society and in social work.

All the wonderful people influencing and taking part in this process deserve special thanks for the enormous work they have done nationally. It is not only the amount of work, but also the way they have given time, flexibility and focus to the progressing of this Nordic co-operation. I have been grateful to witness emotionally bound acting, a high sense of responsibility, hard work – and also humour in the work, and a willingness to have fun, enjoy and relax when it was appropriate. I would like to send love and thanks to everyone concerned – hoping this will reach all. Let's use the emerging and living networks for this.

December 2008

Tarja Heino

Introduction and backgrounds

The 'New Zealand model' rings different bells among various groups of people. Parallel to discussions among sociologists and economists on the so-called 'New Zealand model' there have been other discussions of the model among social workers. Sociologists (and politicians) refer to the model of a welfare state and the new arranging of responsibilities and functions between market, state and citizens. In the recession context, in the beginning of the 1990s it has meant the privatisation of public services and structural changes in how social services are produced. In contrast, social workers have referred to the new model in relation to decision–making and family group conference (FGC). The aim of the discussion was to explore ways to empower (larger) families, children and young people, and to promote the rights of the families in child protection. Although there were discussions about costs, the economic benefit was not the primary motivation for the Nordic countries to import FGC, first in child protection work and later in other fields.

In New Zealand, the FGC was a response to several problems. First, the situation of the Maori people was found to be worse average than for other inhabitants. They had the lowest levels of well-being in several dimensions: economically, in housing, in education, in health and unemployment measures, in social security, in criminal records etc. Additionally, they were subject to a white governance that made decisions on their behalf and which brought few positive outcomes. The Maori children were over-represented as child protection clients and those placed in institutions. Further, economic motives drove the push for innovative ways to decrease costs.

Similar findings concerning immigrants have emerged in many other countries. There are several international research projects, also from Nordic countries, which show ethnic minorities constitute a majority of children in care. Especially in Sweden the activity and response to FGC was enthusiastic, especially in Botkyrka municipality, which has had a decade of projects among immigrants using network methods among these families.

Gale Burford (2006) pointed out that immigrant children were not only more often taken into care, but the inequality was seen also at the other end: white children return home in far more cases than black or latino children. Burford raises the question of whether this represents institutional racism, with a lack of political will to solve the issue. In our Nordic study, Sweden has focused its national study on immigrant children. The position of these children in family group conferences were studied in Botkyrka where immigrant families are over-represented among social services and in child-protection clients.

Trends in child protection in the Nordic countries

Increased numbers of clients in child welfare social work have become a reality in each Nordic country. Unfortunately the statistics are not easily comparable across the Nordic countries. In NOSOSCO's report (2005, 263) two things were noted: 1) Finland implements more support measures in open care or includes these more widely in statistics than the other countries and 2) all the Nordic countries seem to use more support measures in open care than in intervening with children's placements out-of-home.

In all the Nordic countries both the number of children and proportion of children taken into care and placed outside the home has increased. Moreover, the use of coercive actions has increased. Denmark had the largest number of children in care, and Norway had applied coercive measures more than the other Nordic countries.

TABLE 1. Proportion of children placed outside home with and without consent in the Nordic countries in 1994 and in 2003 (NOSOSCO's report 2005, 266)

	DK pr. 1000 children	FI	NO	SE
1994				
– placements	9,4	6,5	5,8	5,4
– of which coercive	0,8	0,8	5,3	1,8
2003				
– placements	10,5	8,1	7,1	6,5
– of which coercive	1,0	1,4	5,3	2,1

In Finland, the number of children who are clients in open care child protection has increased from 30 000 to 60 000 children over ten years. It seems that social work has become extremely burdened, while the turnover of staff is becoming a serious problem; experienced and capable social workers are becoming exhausted and they are withdrawing. Also more and more children are taken into care and placed outside the home. Especially in Finland, child fostering has decreased and the use of institutions has increased. Foster care is used more than institutional care in the other Nordic countries than in Finland. Additionally, the use of commercially operated institutional care has doubled in Finland, and increased in all of the Nordic countries.

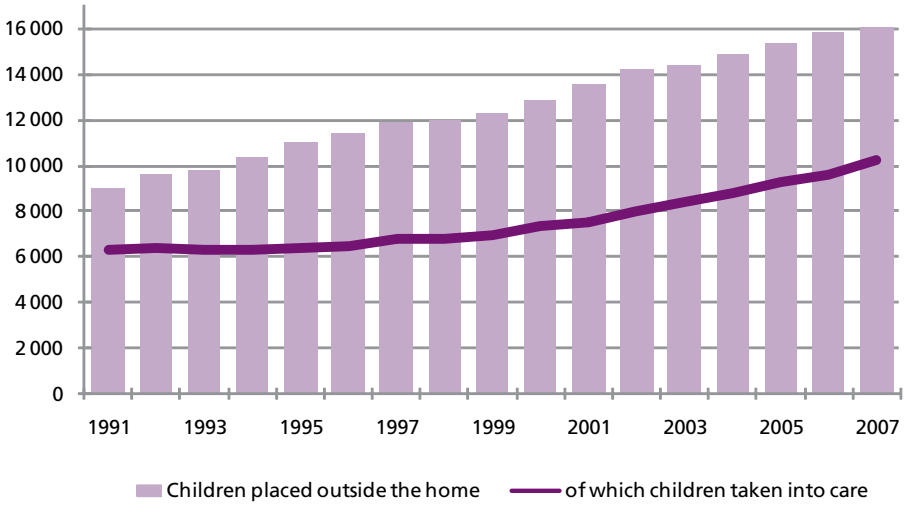


FIGURE 1. Children taken into care and placed outside the home in Finland in 1991–2007

The situation is not very different in other Nordic countries. The trends look similar. Lately, placements have been studied and discussed. Unplanned changes in placements for a child do not happen only for teenagers (Vinnerljung & Hjern & Öman 2004) but also for younger children in foster care (Janhunen 2007). Children need continuity, which in these circumstances is hard to guarantee.

About the Nordic context. A short presentation on the special characteristics concerning social work and child protection systems may be of help in drawing international comparisons with the Nordic discussion and results. The Nordic model of a welfare state signifies several things. The notion of public responsibility means that the municipalities have quite wide and binding duties to ensure the provision of services necessary to their inhabitants – services that stretch from "roads to souls". NGOs are a supplemental provider of social services on the basis of agreements with municipalities.

Social workers are highly educated through universities or polytechnics, and their professional responsibilities and functions are broad. There are no family courts in the Nordic countries, the decisions are made at local level and only decisions that go against the will of the parties are made in regional administrative courts. The concept of taking the child into public care or custody may have different meanings. In Finland the decision to take the child into care can be made by a qualified social worker in the municipality, if it is made in consent with the parties and if no-one opposes the decision.

There are some essential differences in child protection systems in New Zealand and the Nordic countries. First of all, in New Zealand, child protection is primarily state run and centrally governed, whereas in the Nordic countries, local

responsibility and governance has been very strong, and state guidance focuses more on information steering than legislation. That might have an impact on why the Nordic states have been generous in letting the local authorities promote FGCs as good practice, but cautious in preparing any radical changes in law.

FGC has been imported by several organisations internationally. Nordic countries are exceptional in the sense that the public actors or institutions have been active in importing and establishing the FGC project – and also in developing and researching FGC. Public authorities in the Nordic countries have welcomed FGC, both locally and nationally. Various actors in social work have been motivated in searching for methods that focus better on the child. The timing has been very good for us. In a way, FGC has been imported by the public sector itself – compared to those countries where various NGOs, foundations, not-for-profit associations and religious societies have actively imported FGC. It seems obvious that the values and mission of the responsible organisations have an impact on the local response, activity and adaptation of FGC.

Additionally, it seems that if the mission of an NGO is based on strengthening families, it can easily imply that the position of the child remains secondary. This has happened also in New Zealand, where it has taken 17 years of FGC before the child's position has been questioned, and this has happened in parallel with the promotion of the rights of a child (Connolly 2006).

Child protection practices have been criticised in each of the Nordic countries. Some of the criticisms have been heeded and answered by importing, applying and developing the FGC practice. Critics of social agency have focused on using professional power against people, acting with hidden agendas, not revealing facts and motives but hiding behind secrecy etc. Multi-agency and multi-professional practice has caused muddles and let to weakly co-ordinated co-operation. Introduction of FGC in the Nordic countries hit the need to develop open information sharing practices, better hearing practices, human resources that are close to the child, ways of both strengthening and protecting the child, and that promote the rights of the child and of the others.

The aims of FGC were similar to the aims behind developments in child protection practices. The basic phases in the decision-making process (and separation of power) are generally distinguished as follows: investigation – decision – execution. In FGC these were separated clearly enough to demonstrate that one social worker alone should not examine the case, decide on it, and carry out the decision.

A co-ordinator, an impartial person outside the social service system (and outside the family system) comes to help to arrange and host the meeting. The co-ordinator takes care of the preparations before the meeting. The client family invites the persons whom they consider capable of supporting the child, in taking part in solving the problem and in seeking out the necessary resources. The private network works out the plan to find a secure way out of the problematic situation for

the child. They have their private meeting alone, together, without any professionals and even without the co-ordinator. They present the plan to the authorities so that they can adopt a position on them. The social workers have a veto, they have the final power to accept the presented plan or not. The accepted plan is followed up, as decided at the end of GFC meeting.

The phases of the FGC-process are as follows:

1. Preparation
2. FGC
    1) information giving
    2) the private meeting
    3) presenting the plan and deciding on it
3. Follow-up

The social worker initiates the process. The social worker has the last word. The social worker delegates most of the preparatory work to the co-ordinator; does most of the presentation of information to the other professionals; does most of the analysing of the networks; does most of the solution-seeking work and explaining the alternatives to the private network. In the end, the social worker can concentrate on decision–making, acceptance of the plan presented, and on arranging the resources needed to fulfil it.

Importing FGC and affects on the Nordic child protection laws

The method has spread all over the world. While FGC in New Zealand was originally an innovation adopted into law, it has not spread in the form of a legal provision. Rather, it has spread as a good practice (Doolan 2004) – and again, not nationally, but in patchwork fashion. It spread initially from New Zealand to some states in Australia, the USA, Canada, the UK, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Spain, Slovakia, Poland, Russia, South Africa and so on, reaching every continent and mostly as a good practice operating locally. Gale Burford (2006) has found various applications of FGC and calculates there to be more than 50 names for the method. At the same time, some of these applications have become distanced from their origins.

New Zealand arranged an International Conference for the first time in 2006. It was arranged to celebrate the legal provision and FGC as an innovation. Steward Bartlett, head of FGC in New Zealand, emphasised FGC as their creation, their innovation. “It is an institution – but it can’t be institutionalised. It is a human process” (Bartlett 2006). This insight has without doubt been confirmed – as an innovation it has become widespread and has been reconstructed and reformed numerous times.

None of the Nordic countries has adopted FGC as a legal provision. Instead, the Nordic countries have renewed their laws on child protection in the 2000s. FGC has had a role in the discussions concerning the sections of the legislation.

Sweden was the first to introduce a minor change in the law: before placing the child outside the family, the possibilities for relatives to take the child to live with them have to be examined. The implementation of this change was evaluated and it was clear that the change and even information about the change met with practice only little by little.

In Denmark political attention and interest has been shown towards FGC. During 2005 nationwide training was arranged for social workers and co-ordinators. There are guidelines for practice accepted by the Ministry for Social Welfare on how to apply the Social Service Act (concerning § 57a) so that the family and network are systematically connected into social work: "this may happen for instance by using methods like FGC, network meetings or agreements with the family." The formulation of the Act does not oblige the municipality to arrange FGC, but the municipality has to define standards for arranging the service when needed, and to decide on how to secure the systematic involvement of the network in case work.

In Norway the FGC model has been a part of the political debate since late in the 1990s. A national project on the implementation on FGC was launched in 1998 and followed by research. FGC was first mentioned in political documents in 2000 (NOU 2000:12) *Barnevernet i Norge* (Child Protection in Norway). Empowering practice was discussed in relation to the FGC-model. This was also the case in Stortingsmelding 40 (2001–2002) *Om Barn og Ungdomsvern (About the protection of Children and Youth)*. In the Norwegian State Budget for 2002, FGC was explicitly defined as one of the contributions to vulnerable children, youth and families. This was followed up by the Ministry of Children and Family in 2002: "The Ministry will also continue the focus on FGC in child protection(…)" by offering expertise training for social workers and co-ordinators to all local social services interested in implementing the method. (Ministry of Children and Family 2002:15). A new national project for implementation and evaluation of FGC was granted financial support for the period of 2003–2006.

In the revised state budget 2007, the Ministry of Children and Equality stated that child protected services should work in order to implement FGC as an alternative method for decision making in all regions of Norway. Accordingly a National plan for the implementation of FGC has been worked out for the period of 2007–2012.

In Finland the child protection law was renewed (came into force in 2008) and in the preamble texts, FGC is presented. The paragraph follows the Swedish example. It (Section 32) is titled as "Charting out the child's family network":

> Before the child is placed outside the home, it should be investigated whether the parent with whom the child does not primarily reside, relatives or other persons with close personal links with the child can take the child to reside with them or otherwise participate in supporting the child. The investigation need not be made if it is deemed unnecessary due to the urgency of the case or for another justified reason. Issues concerning the child's place of residence and placement shall always be resolved in the child's best interest.

In Iceland FGC has not been discussed as a question of renewing the child protection law.

None of the Nordic countries have introduced any changes to the procedure for taking a child into care; it is more or less dependent on the social worker as to how (s)he interprets the situation and assesses the best way to proceed. Although the Nordic countries have implemented the primary idea of FGC, none of them have yet gone beyond adopting it as a good practice, for example by making it a legal requirement. Rather, it has been conceived merely as an empowering tool in social work. The idea of a structural change in the child protection system - giving a client the right to produce and suggest a solution and including him or her, along with their natural network, in the decision-making process - has not yet been realised.

Mike Doolan (2002, 14–16) distinguishes between three different approaches in the shape of implementations based on legislation, procedural guidelines and best practices, respectively. Each approach justifies itself by a specific mandate and has a different role in the process of embedding. Doolan (2002, 17) draws the following conclusion:

> Introducing Family Group Conferences into child welfare proceedings where there is no legislative mandate for them is proving extraordinary difficult to achieve. It may be that things will not change markedly unless, or until, a strong family rights perspective emerges in communities which demands a response from legislators, policy makers and practitioners alike.
>
> Family Group Conferences put families at the centre of decision-making processes which affect them. It is an effective and respectful way to work with families. Perhaps it is time to take a stand about whether their use is merely an option which professionals have to offer and thereby control, or whether their use is a right that families have that professionals are obliged to fulfil.

Furthermore, if we use the word 'family' rather than 'child' in the above description of FGC implementation, we get from New Zealand to the Nordic countries. Research on FGC from the child perspective offers research-based conclusions

that are useful not only in implementing but also justifying the FGC process. In all Nordic countries, such conclusions have been made available in various ways to different target groups, including decision-makers, politicians, professionals and citizens. Norm-based guidance has been achieved to some extent, relevant guidelines include the presentation of FGC, and the method can be found among descriptions of good practices. Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go in all countries before children are actively offered an opportunity for or the right to FGC.

The implementation of FGC can finally be described through a few exciting turning points. First, the FGC was launched as an innovation in New Zealand and then spread around the world. However, in general, it did not become rooted internationally through legislative reforms but as a good practice. Internationally, the first turning point in implementation occurred with a change of mandate from a norm-based to an *idea-based procedure*. Second, when the FGC spread for example to the Nordic countries, it was adapted to national conditions, *resulting in specific national models*. This was the second turning point, now at the national level. The third turning point likewise occurred at the national level: the method in a child protection context has been developed instead of a family rights orientation towards a more *child-oriented approach* in the Nordic countries. The innovation has led to further innovations. The good practice is evolving constantly. Descriptive models have inspired new experimentation and development efforts.

The projects of FGC in the Nordic countries. The Nordic countries (except Iceland) have imported FGC (familjerådslag) and carried out the national projects on FGC during the period 1995–2002. All of them have been reported nationally (Sweden: Andersson & Bjerkman 1999, Sundell & Hæggman 1999 and Sundell 2002; Denmark: Rasmussen 2002, Rasmussen & Hansen 2002; Hansen & Hansen & Hansen & Rasmussen 2003; Norway: Horverak 2001, Hyrve 2002; Finland: Heino 2000, 2001 and 2003).

The Nordic co-operation in FGC research began in 2002 with the establishing of a knowledge base. The experiences and results of these research and development projects have been compared, analysed and reported on in the first Nordic report (Heino, Reinikainen & Bergman 2003). This work, also financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers, introduces the theoretical and research methodological contexts of the FGC model. The practical applications and their variations in the Nordic countries were studied and analysed. The outcomes from an evaluation of the research were presented from different perspectives and foci: child, family, co-ordinator, social worker. The report made it very clear that the FGC and its outcomes had in general not been explored from a child's perspective.

The Nordic Council of Ministers has been a facilitator at all stages in the development of the project, first making it possible to co-operatively plan the research setting during 2003. After planning was completed, preparations were made for the actual start, which meant beginning to collect the research material

(2004). The next period saw the main work of the research (2005–2006), with the final stage being the producing and writing of the report (2007–2008).

In parallel with the national projects, the co-operation began in arranging the Nordic conferences. The first Nordic conference on FGC was arranged by the city of Botkyrka in 2000. The idea was to exchange experiences nationally and between Nordic countries. There were 200 participants from practice and research, and an anthology was later published (Erkers & Nyberg 2001). The first conference was the starting point both for further Nordic co-operation on FGC and for the tradition of Nordic conferencing. The co-operation meant presentations in the Nordic conferences where the research findings could be reflected against the experiences of people working in research, development, education and practice. Co-operation between these fields and the Nordic people involved has continued ever since. Five conferences have been arranged since then, the last in 2008 again in Botkyrka.[1]

Through these six productive years, the Nordic FGC experiences have been reported in various networks and seminars, in both Nordic countries and internationally. Such dissemination of our development experiences has been one of our network's strengths and specialities (see Appendix 1).

At the same time, those six years have been a remarkable time in the research field in general. In 2002 we came to the conclusion that the child perspective in FGC studies was lacking, but the situation looks quite different now in 2008. There are more child-focused studies available, social work with children has developed practices, and also the child's position is more discussed in FGC.

The general aims of this Nordic research project are centred around four goals:

1. To seek and develop an alternative way of exploring FGC and social work in general.
2. To strengthen the position of research focusing on the child.
3. To strengthen the position of the child and to keep the child's perspective visible in practical child protection social work.
4. To create ways to establish dialogical settings and to carry out dialogues both between the Nordic researchers and between people in the practical settings in each country.

The national research teams and groups have unique characteristics. **Sweden** has been very active in developing FGC, and Botkyrka municipality was one of the first to start a project on FGC, as well as being one of the most active in both

1 Erkers, Mats & Nyberg, Eva (Red.) (2001) Familjerådslag i Norden. Erfarenheter från fält och forskning. FoU-Södertörn Skriftserie nr 15/01. Stockholm.

Faureholm, Jytte & Pedersen, Karen (red.) Demokratisering af det sociale arbejde med familier. Rapport fra Nordisk konference om familierådslagning 15.–16. Marts 2002 i Köpenhavn.

The Third Nordic Conference on FGC 27.–28.8.2004 in Helsinki, Finland. Stakes. (Presentations available on the web-sites).

Schjelderup, Liv E. & Omre, Cecilie (eds.) Veivisere for et fremtidig barnevern. Familieråd og barn i moderne barnevern. Trondheim: Tapir Akademisk forlag, 2007.

implementing FGC and developing it further in Sweden and internationally. Botkyrka has continued to develop the model and several years ago established it on a permanent basis, with full-time co-ordinators in the social welfare office. Botkyrka was not included in the previous national project on FGC, and so their project was not included in the national evaluation (Sundell & Hæggman 1999; Sundell 2002).

However, Botkyrka carried out an independent evaluation, with the results and findings differing from those of the national-level evaluations (Sjöblom 1999). Local findings in Botkyrka were more positive than the nationally measured outcomes. The National Social Board was involved in the national project and evaluation. Botkyrka received neither material support nor did they feel any encouragement from the national body. Rather, the Swedish FGC-people have formed an active network with two annual meetings and strong peer and colleague support (PM 3/04; Nyberg 2007).

FoU-Södertörn is a research and development unit that was owned by three (seven since 2007) municipalities. Its activity and co-operation with Botkyrka has been crucial. They did get support from Allmänna Barnhuset, a fund for child protection development and research work. The positive funding answer came in the spring 2004. The special focus was on immigrant children and FGC in these families.

In **Finland,** STAKES is a former National Board of Social Welfare, reorganised as a National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. STAKES has been active in carrying out the first national project to import FGC and develop its application in Finland. Co-operation with the metropolitan capital area dates back to this time, and now, in the context of this Nordic research, the empirical data is also being collected from this area. The partners in the field in Finland are the Heikki Waris Institute and the three cities in the metropolitan capital area. STAKES has made the research possible. Further, the local FGC-project groups and people from the Heikki Waris Institute have been flexible in their co-operation, and they have seen the wider significance of the research for practice. STAKES has arranged national FGC workshops to act as a forum for exchanging experiences on FGC practices.

Denmark had a Ministry-led national FGC-project, and the project leader has participated in the Nordic co-operation. She continued later with a Ministry-financed education program on FGC. It was decided that the research would continue in the centre in Aabenraa. Denmark reorganised the central governance of social affairs at the same time, with much effort needed to obtain financing from the state for the national research. The motivation for measuring outcomes was at the time pronounced, as saving money was in the interests of the government.

Recruiting a network of co-ordinators (40–50) took place in 2004, and this action seemed to be significant to the whole process and helped when it came to arranging the FGCs.

In **Norway**, Liv Schjelderup and Cecilie Omre have been the promoters both in the preparation phase and in the research phase. They have active links also in the NODPlus network, developing a master FGC module. Both in Norway and in Sweden, parallel to starting the Nordic project, lively discussions were ongoing about evidence-based research and about methods. Various opinions focused not only on the outcomes, but also in how to obtain financing for the research and implementation. At the time, multi-system therapy (MST) was going strong both in Sweden and in Norway.

The ministry in Norway has been active in introducing FGC and financing a large implementation and evaluation design. NOVA, a Norwegian research and development centre for welfare, was given the task of carrying out the national project. The aim was to implement FGC in 4 regions (involving 30–40 municipalities). The project was seen to have three main stages: carrying out the FGCs, following up the FGCs, and reporting the results of FGC. Part of the design was comparative (control groups), with 100 FGCs each in both the control and the study groups, with measurements before and after (one-year follow-up). The final results of the project have already been reported (Falck red. 2006).

Parallel to this and to ensure a special focus on children, the Norwegian colleagues received a special grant from the same Ministry connected to the Nordic research.

Iceland came to hear about FGC and the Nordic FGC-research from our Norwegian colleagues who visited the University of Reykjavik as part of their NordPlus business. At the same time, discussions in two other Nordic meetings resulted in interest being shown in FGC, both in the practice and research fields: one meeting was between Nordic social work colleagues and lecturers and the other meeting was the Nordic conference on child protection. The university and the city have also been involved. As they say in Iceland "everybody knows everyone" – the net organised "by networking itself". Nevertheless, two energetic women, Freydís Freysteinsdóttir and Hervór Alma Árnadóttir, helped to get it up and running.

The Nordic Council of Ministers financed the Nordic project on the basis of experiences and results collected from the FGC projects running in each country during 2002. Altogether, the Nordic research project has received 100 000 DK per year in financing (in 2003 for initial planning costs and in 2004 for starting the research). The Nordic funding covered two collective meetings for the project group per year and some of the co-ordination work. The grant was bigger during the actual research years 2005–2007 (190 000–197 000 DK per year).

Each country has had to finance the research activities mainly through national resources (the researchers' salaries etc., project meetings connected with international seminars and workshops). Denmark, Norway and Sweden have succeeded in obtaining national funding for their parts of the common research. In Finland, STAKES has supported the research, and in Iceland the national funding has been arranged by grants from different funds. See the table in Appendix 2.

The project task challenged also the national structures for research and practice development and education in each country. It made visible the continuous change in the situation as a whole: the ongoing process of organising and reorganising research and practice in the Nordic countries. Trying to find a functional way of organising the working connection between research and practice in social work (and social work with children and families) has been a topical issue in each of the Nordic countries. The rough edges have also become visible in the context of organisational reforms. During the years of implementing this study, several changes took place in the Nordic countries in research and development within the area of social work and child welfare (see Ljunggren 2005).

In Finland, the concept of practice research has been launched (Satka et al. 2005), though not without its critics. The nationwide arrangements have been realised by creating several "excellence centres" for social affairs. They co-ordinate development work and co-operate with universities and colleges in combining research and practice modules for students with the social work in municipalities. Lately, several special regional units for combining development, evaluation and education functions with clinical work have been established with the support of state funding. There are to date about 50 units aligned with particular sectors in social work, and several consists of child protection institutions or clinics. Their future is unclear, as there are yet no steady financial arrangements in place.

In Sweden, a number of FoU units (research and development) have acted as practical links between practice and research for an extended time. There was a high profile project in the beginning of the 2000s, which came and went. FoU activities have been challenged and several investigations have been conducted in the field. Also the reorganising of the body responsible for the methodological development in assessing and following up social work CUS (Centre for Evaluation of Social Work) into IMS (Institute for Evidence-based Social Work Practice) happened during the project years.

In Denmark organisational changes have also been carried out. When we started there were several UFC units (education, research, communication/ intermediation), and those have been reorganised at the national level in parallel with the reorganisation of the central government.

In Norway four special development units for child welfare (Barnevernets udviklingssenter) were established in the 1990s. Later the Oslo branch of NOVA (Norwegian Social Research) was merged with the national research and development centres.

In Iceland, Barnaverndarstofa (the Government Agency for Child Protection) has had several different roles. In addition to administrative tasks, it has engaged in research and development. Working together with other actors, Sigiður Jonsðóttir (2005) has described developmental activity in the municipality of Reykjavik.

The co-operation between practice and research varies between the countries. Of course, there are various experiences of success, in rhetoric and in practice.

The realisation takes time nationally and also locally, between the living parts, individuals professionals and administrative bodies.

Each Nordic country has its own situation at the general level – and the variations in research and development also concerning FGC are visible. Research on country differences between the rationales, developmental features and practices would constitute a topic of its own.

Reporting the Nordic research on FGC from a child perspective is motivated by several factors. First, the national research reports are available only in Nordic languages: Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish - and not all of them include summaries in English. Even in the Nordic countries, people cannot usually read each other's native languages. By reporting in English we also offer the international audience an opportunity to get to know about the research being done. The first motive therefore is to collect and present the findings in one report to the wider audience.

Secondly, we have also reflected on the national findings, and this makes the report more than just a presentation or summary of the national reports. Actually, in the following pages the author of the Nordic report is making a study of the research, using those – both Nordic discussions and national reports – as research material.

We have also other motives to produce this report. While experimenting and exploring new kinds of research methods we find it interesting to present what we have used and how. Reporting the findings on how these methods worked is essential. We value receiving reactions and reflections; we welcome opinions on whether these methods can really be adapted in practical settings in social work.

About writing

The Nordic project group consists of people with diverse scientific, educational and practical knowledge and experience of social work in child protection and Family Group Conference. There have been no changes in the research group members during the research years 2003–2007. During the process the Nordic researchers and supervisors have reflected, produced and commented on some of the drafts individually and in the meetings. The final manuscript has been sent to the researchers in the Nordic project group for commenting.

The Finnish researcher Sarianna Reinikainen did a wonderful job in taking care of the several memoranda and research papers. We have together been responsible for the various texts over the years, and these texts have been of great help in reporting. In the end, the research project leader, Tarja Heino is responsible for the final text.

The author has received translation help from Leena Saarela and from Tom Arnkil at STAKES. The final report is has been language edited by Mark Phillips also of STAKES, who did a very good job of 'translating' the author's THinglish (Tarja Heino's English).

Mapping out the general context

FGC is situated at the forefront of discussions on the boundary between the public and private sphere. According to Ulrich Beck (1994) the modernisation of society is characterized by individualisation. The relationships between society and the individual is changing profoundly as traditions and traditional social bonds give way to relationships allowing more independence on the one hand and more dependence on societal arrangements on the other hand. According to Niclas Luhmann (1989) the most important feature, indeed the core, of modernisation is the diversification of society; systems draw boundaries and create sub-systems, sub-sub-systems and so on. This process is visible in the development of science, economy, jurisdiction, professions, etc. (Abbot 1988). In professional support services we encounter multi-professional and multi- agency settings that often lead to a kind of "pulverisation" of help. Clients have a hard time trying to integrate the fragmented whole – as do the social workers themselves.

It is at this juncture of diversified societal systems, where relationships are formed with individuals themselves undergoing changing social bonds, that we see FGC developing. Here we can also position the Convention on the Rights of the Child as a document where the boundary between the public and the private is defined. Child protection, as a system, has been formed at this boundary.

Hannele Forsbeg (1998) has in her dissertation analysed the development in the relationship between state and family. She starts her analysis at the paternalistic phase, where the category of childhood was non-existent. She leads up to the state paternalistic phase, where the child is defined as an object of protection and where the origins of the family childhood can be seen: the meaning of the mother as guardian of the moral elements. The family childhood emphasises the relationships in the family, while the modern state co-operates mainly with the mother. The final phase, named the Separating of the Child from the Family outlines the direct contact of the child with the state, via professionals, and is where the role of the father strengthens. The family is defined as a network of individual relationships, and the child as a capable and adjusting individual; the border between the adult and child is narrowed; discourses on social problems and deviancy are focused on interpretative matters and on language; diversity is emphasized (ibid.).

Focus on family or focus on children reflects the last transition outlined by Forsberg. We decided in the Nordic research to emphasize the child perspective. It is unique in FGC that the problems with the parents are not the focus and it is not attempted to "cure away" the problems at first. Instead, the focus is directly on the child, and the aim is to seek a secure and functional solution for the child. Secondly, this solution is sought out by the private network members.

The FGC research is focused on the boundary of public and private in child protection, where the state needs and asks for help from the private network. (At that time in New Zealand the state had concluded that it did not have adequate working solutions to offer the Maori children and so were forced to turn to the private network). The public-private boundary is utterly clear in FGC: in the public sphere there is concern, information giving and a veto; in the private sphere there is meeting and planning, where it is not appropriate for the professionals to go (though invitations to participate are presented and there are fears about what might happen there). The researchers in the Nordic research went there, with their existing preconceptions, and we will report on the surprises and on what happens there in the private meeting.

Panu Pulma (2004), a Finnish historian, states that in the 1970s the rights and voice of children entered the agenda because of ideological changes in the 1960s. He thinks that discussion became the most important tool for a social worker, moving towards negotiations and agreements inside the family. The notion of "the best interests of the child" was introduced in the 1980s, and then, especially the *power to define* became a focus for various battles. Actually there were two kinds of battles: the battle of interests between parent(s) and the child, and the battle between experts about rating their mutual statements. It is this juncture that provided the possibility for FGC to emerge, to negotiate in between both these boundaries.

Traditionally various professionals present their views and give statements in child protection cases. The private network has become more visible and their claims more often presented. The relevant professions and disciplines, each with their various specific concepts, have their own say; also, their position and power has varied in the child protection field historically. There were golden times for medical sciences and psychiatrics. Nowadays, lawyers enjoy significant influence. Social work has adopted both juridical and psychological concepts, some say, at the cost of social concepts. If anything, it is social work that has come in for critical questioning recently (See Lundström 1993; Parton 1998 and 2000). The dispute is as yet unresolved.

In the Nordic countries the social worker has by law been given the professional power to define the best interests of the child in relation to the need for child protection measures. It has been enshrined in law that the best interests of a child must be prioritised. The social worker has at least three ways to proceed: first, they can work *via the parents*. When supportive interventions for the parents are not enough, or the help is not in the best interests of a child, something else must be done. The social workers can *help the child directly* and bypass the parents, or they can help via a third way: they can *enlarge their activity* away from the core family to the social networks of the child. They can ask for help from the larger family, but they can also turn towards other professionals. *Additionally, they can combine these approaches*. In the ideal FGC, the matter is discussed both directly with the child and separately with the parents. The setting challenges *the parents*

who are positioned between the child and the invited personal network. The private relationships are then in focus, in a sensitive way. Additionally, the service system, the professionals connected to the case, are present and can bring their measures to the arena.

FGC can be seen as a possibility, but it is not self-evidently causing the anticipated outcomes. Holland et al. (2005) propose that the FGC approach has not only the potential to shift the balance of power between the state and the client families but that it may have the potential to democratise decision-making within families. However, it is also noted that such interventions can be seen to be maintaining social control through subtle and possibly unintentional means (ibid.). If parents are positioned between the child, professionals and private network, there is room for social control to form its presence, but maybe there is also room for supportive elements to find their place. Jane Dalrymple (2002) notices that when the children see their family and the state working as a team, the advocacy support enables them both to influence the decision-making concerning their lives and to have a more equitable role in the process.

Children in FGC

Follow-up research on Family Group Conference was active in the beginning of the 1990s in New Zealand after they passed new legislation. There then followed a long silence – until in recent years, following increased international interest, some new articles and research outcomes have been published. Nevertheless, when we started our research, the child perspective seemed to be either missing or marginalised. Even today it is not in the mainstream.

International research has been collected and discussed in several international conferences and published reports (Hudson, Morris, Maxwell & Galaway 1996; Marsh & Crow 1998; Burford & Hudson 2000). In the first few years, the reports concerned the relevant legislation in New Zealand and the rationales, principles and ideology of the FGC, as well as the implementation of legislation and various international projects. In between, the American Humane Association invited national and international researchers to present the results in a publication, where Merkel-Holguin & Nixon & Burford (2003) made a summary, or synopsis as they call it, of FGC research and evaluation in child welfare. The latest international conference was held in New Zealand in 2006, celebrating the FGC innovation and creating dialogues between practice and research.

Elisabeth Backe-Hansen (2006) made an international literature study for the Nordic Campbell Collaboration. According to her, there are two kinds of evaluation studies. On the one hand, there are studies on how the FGC has been put into practice and how it has been modified from the model originally developed in New Zealand. On the other hand, studies have been made on the effects and outcomes

of FGCs. The author concludes that research should not be repeated indefinitely as such (although the results are good in similar ways). It is time to ask critically why practice has not become rooted in the substantial research. At the end of the review Backe-Hansen calls the large body of studies the first generation of FCG research, studies that are distinctively qualitative evaluations with small research materials. She suggests comprehensive, controlled-design-based statistical studies.

Certain results have been repeated in tens of small studies on client experiences and FGC outcomes in different parts of the world. Surprisingly, children and family members have used almost the same words to describe the experiences of being heard, their fears and satisfaction. This cannot be ignored as evidence, and care should be given to studying the phenomenon more closely.

Assessing the recent body of research, Backe-Hansen (2006) judged that it is difficult to reconcile two opposite claims: remaining true to the method's original form and remaining loyal to the demands of the contextual and cultural sensitivity inherent in the way of working. If one is sensitive, pressures towards modifications may be felt. If the original model is modified, how are the possibilities for international comparisons and interpretations secured? Around the world, the FGC model has been revised and adapted to national and cultural contexts. Some have even omitted the family group's own meeting time (especially in the USA), or it has been agreed, at the family's request, that the co-ordinator joins the family's own meeting. Among the modifications are models where bureaucratic elements have taken over the activity and the system colonialises the method (the workers setting more and more conditions, invoking their working hour frames or expertise).

A previous research review by Sarianna Reinikainen (2007) has been made use of in drawing up the review. She also states that very little reliable research knowledge that is based on comparative designs is available on the *impacts* of the working method as compared with the more traditional decision-making processes. So far, at least one study that has used large research and control groups and a two-year follow-up period has been published in Sweden (Sundell 2002). However, as the study has some major shortcomings with regard to the research design, even the researchers themselves recommend that the findings should be interpreted with caution (see Sundell & Vinnerljung 2004; Huntsman 2006; Nyberg 2004). NOVA in Norway has carried out an evaluation research with a one-year follow-up (Falck & Clausen 2006) and they also report problems with the method that make conclusions tentative. Follow-up studies have also been carried out elsewhere, for instance in Washington, USA (Gunderson & Cahn & Wirth 2003).

Research abounds mostly on different participants' *experiences* of the FGC. Nearly all studies show that the experiences have mostly been very positive. Families have generally experienced feelings of empowerment during the process and felt that they have been listened to and appreciated. Further, they think that interaction between the family members has improved and conflicts have decreased. All in all, they have regarded the FGC as a good way of dealing with problems, mostly

preferring it to the traditional methods of decision-making and of case meetings (see e.g. Einarsson 2002; Hansen & Rasmussen 2003; Heino 2003; Holland, O'Neill, Scourfield & Pithouse 2003; Marsh & Crow 1998; Pennell & Burford 2000; Sundell 2000; Sundell & Vinnerljung 2004; Walton, Roby, Frandsen & Davidson 2003). Corresponding inquiries into client experiences about "traditional client meetings" yield that both the meetings and their outcomes regularly get poorer assessments than those that are based on dialogue. This has also been shown in Nordic studies.

Children's views and participation have received the least attention in research (Dalrymple 2002). On the one hand, interviewing children is perceived to be in many ways more challenging than interviewing adults. On the other hand, access to children who are clients of child welfare requires permission from many gatekeepers. Furthermore, there is uncertainty about how children can and want to tell about their personal matters. Often children's experiences have been interpreted by adult family members or professionals. Families' experiences have been analysed without distinguishing between family members' individual experiences (Lawrence 2002). However, a survey that examined FGC experiences in Finland showed that children's experiences of having been listened to were not as positive as those reported by adults (Heino 2003). Järventie (1999, 80) has found that adults' perceptions of children's well-being differ from children's own perceptions.

There is also disagreement among adults as to the significance of children's participation. Some believe that participation in drawing up a plan and making decisions forces children to shoulder too much responsibility or that children find such participation stressful or tedious. Some others consider that children have the right to participate and that basically their participation is necessary (Sieppert & Unrau 2003; Huntsman 2006). Although the FGC seems to promote co-operation between different parties and provide the necessary conditions for the empowerment of *all* family members, children do not necessarily feel that they have taken part in the co-operation or become empowered. From the child's perspective, the team that is formed when the family (parents) and child welfare authorities combine forces may seem frightening and superior (Dalrymple 2002).

Recent years have seen an increase in research on the FGC from the child's point of view (Andersson & Bjerkman 1999; Clarkson & Frank 2000; van Beek 2003; Dalrymple 2002; Thomas 2003; Holland et al. 2003; Horverak 2006; Strandbo 2006). Increasing interest has been shown simultaneously in several countries. Currently a few studies are available where the research material mostly consists of interviews with children. Studies of the FGC where the focus is on the child's point of view have usually been aimed at analysing children's experiences of whether they have been listened to and been allowed to participate in the process. Most studies have asked school-age children and adolescents about their experiences. The experiences have been looked at qualitatively and quantitatively. In most studies there is considerable variation in children's experiences. Some studies have found mostly positive (e.g. van Beek 2003) or mostly negative experiences (e.g. Clarkson

& Frank 2000), although overall the emphasis is slightly more towards positive than negative experiences (e.g. Horverak 2003). Differences in the findings can be explained by various factors. The studies differ in the ways in which the FGCs have been carried out in different countries and places. There is also variation in the research populations (situations among children and adolescents). Moreover, there are differences in research questions and methods.

In Norway, Horverak (2003; see also Horverak 2006) grouped the adolescents interviewed (aged 12–21) on the basis of their experiences into four groups: those feeling hurt (de sårede), disappointed (de skuffede), satisfied (de fornöyde) and very satisfied (de kjempefornöyde). The first group included adolescents who perceived that the FGC had hurt them – mainly through the things that the private network members and authorities had said – and was fruitless. The second group included those who perceived the FGC as a good working method but were disappointed that the plan had never been implemented, especially by the authorities. The third group included those who perceived that the FGC had changed the situation in the way they had hoped. In particular, they appreciated having been given a say on the plan. The fourth group ("very satisfied") included those who were satisfied both with the FGC as a working method and with its outcomes. They perceived that the FGC had helped them improve their self-esteem and their family relations. The study involved adolescents from Denmark and Norway. Danish adolescents were clearly more satisfied than the Norwegians. Seven in nine Danish respondents fell in the third and fourth groups ("satisfied" and "very satisfied"), compared with only three in eleven among Norwegian respondents. (Op. cit.)

Children have reported feeling like they have been listened to more often than they have felt that their views have been disregarded (see e.g. Holland et al. 2003; Schjelderup & Omre 2002; Sundell & Haeggman 1999; Thomas 2003; Walton et al. 2003). In contrast to this finding, Clarkson and Frank (2000) sum up the results of a survey among 35 children who had participated in FGCs by citing the request made by the children: *Adults ought to listen to what I'm saying*. In their study, children mostly perceived that they had not been listened to; their experiences were similar to children's experiences of the traditional decision-making procedures in child welfare (child welfare conferences, reviews)(Dalrymple 2002; Lawrence 2002). Likewise, in the first FGCs in Finland not all children felt that they had been listened to. One in three children perceived that the other participants did not consider their views to be important, and one in four that there were many things that could not be talked about in the FGC situation (Heino 2003).

Children's experiences of the participation of private network members vary. In most cases, the experiences have been positive. According to Holland et al. (2003), the FGC is for children more significant emotionally than in terms of its concrete outcomes. For them the most important thing about the conference was to meet members of the private network and to express their own views, while finding concrete solutions was ranked only third in order of importance.

By contrast, the adult members of the private network, the social worker and the co-ordinator regarded that the most important thing was to find solutions. Many children were surprised at the positive feedback they received from the other participants with regard to their character, capabilities and acting in the FGC. This had had a significantly positive effect on their self-image (Op.cit.). Likewise, van Beek (2003) found that children appreciated the attention they received from their family members; it gave them the feeling that the adults cared for them and wanted to act for their good (Op. cit.).

Some children's experiences of the FGC have been negative. Nordic FGC processes have shown that children may find it hurtful that relatives and other people are told about their personal matters and that the network will intervene in the situation (Rasmussen & Hansen 2002). The FGC process may give rise to feelings of uncertainty and insecurity in children (and their parents or other custodians). Revealing one's own life and difficulties to all members of the private network and uncertainty about future solutions may strain the children emotionally and they can also react to this strain during the process. Children have also been found to be afraid of presenting their views in front of the private network or find it otherwise difficult (Lawrence 2002). They have thought that there is too much talk at the meeting, and found it hard to listen to people criticising their behaviour (van Beek 2003). Further, children have not always understood the discussions during the FGC and the course of the process (Lawrence 2002; Walton et al. 2003). As a consequence, for them, the FGC has not been different from the traditional working methods of child welfare: Many studies have indicated that children and adolescents hope that social workers would give them more information and keep them better updated as things proceed (see Einarsson 2002, 77).

Fears expressed by children may be due to the fact that they have experienced violence: whenever sensitive matters have been brought up, the situation has become aggravated (Oranen 2001). On the other hand, although the necessary conditions for making choices, influencing the process and being listened to could be created, children may feel insecure in their affective relationships and thus cannot necessarily trust the adults (who in turn may have no trust in the authorities) so that they are not able to make use of the support and help that they are offered (Bardy 2000).

Little research is available on the extent to which children's presence in the FGC has led to their genuine participation in decision-making. In Sweden, Britt Andersson and Anders Bjerkman (1999) examined what factors were associated with successful/unsuccessful FGC processes. They classified the material into three types of family group conferences described as *omslutande* (inclusive, included), *inneslutande* (enclosed, encircled) and *ambivalent*. The largest group consisted of (successful) those FGCs described as *omslutande*. The concept refers to the encouragement to be involved that is received by the child, as well as a feeling experienced by children that they can rely on adults. Such FGCs largely attained

their targets; they were able to look at things from the child's point of view and they involved persons of strategic importance and often also several generations. They managed to provide unexpected guarantees for the child's situation and new resourceful people were found who took on responsibility and offered help. Children had a feeling of belonging, and weaker ties were reinforced. The family received everyday support from the authorities and the members of the private network had found their place. By contrast, the FGCs described as *inneslutande* were fewer, including unsuccessful processes that were the opposite of those described above. A typical feature of an unsuccessful process was either that the authorities seemed to be closely involved in the family's everyday life or a "make do" attitude seemed to prevail. A successful process could not be launched if the focus was on adults' own problems and the child perspective could not be kept to the fore (op. cit.).

In the project by Barnardos Wiltshire the training of independent advocacy was arranged (Dalrymple 2002). 29 of 35 children chose an independent advocate for themselves in FGC and six children chose a family advocate. This small study found that the autonomy of the advocate had an impact on the children in three ways: first, their personal position was enhanced; second, they felt stronger within the family network; and third, they were more able to participate in the professional decision making (eg., 293). To be better informed and aware of the process, the child's support person in FGC has been seen to have an important role. Furthermore, the support person is needed in identifying conflicting motives and aspirations within the private network, as well as in anticipating what consequences there will be for the child when things are brought up for discussion. The support person's task is seen to support the child within the network. One of the topics discussed lately concerns the role of an advocate – or support person as we called it. The more the child's position and perspective has been elevated the more discussion has focused on whether the support person is to be chosen from the child's network or would (s)he be an independent professional from outside, with no connection to the networks.

In Dalrymple's study (2002) the independent professional advocates did not participate in the private time but the network-appointed advocate did. Another thing is to notice a difference between the concepts used of "advocating" and "supporting" and to consider whether there is a difference that is reflected in the basic setting. Astrid Strandbu (2007, 251–260) concludes that the FGC model needs further development, focusing on child participation and the role of children's buddies, as she calls support persons. She argues that these support persons from the child's network need better information about the task, and in the end, she suggests a more professionalized role for the support person in the Norwegian context.

It has become evident that it is hard to keep the child in focus. Special efforts and measures are needed to keep orientating to the child. To follow special routines and structures will be of help. "Secure standards" have been presented in Finland

in a guide book (Heino, ed. 2000). For instance, based on a psychiatric study, informing the child (about the illness) and making sure the situation (a mentally ill parent acting in an odd way) is explained is crucial for the child to recover and survive (Solantaus & Toikka 2005).

Towards the main concepts in use

Child perspective

In the beginning (after the first report of 2002) the idea of a child perspective was chosen to lead and characterise our research. The concept was not defined exactly; it was taken as if to be commonly understood and as if to be a clear concept, used in guiding practice towards the next phase in developmental direction. During the project years, reports on several development and research activities have been published in each Nordic country on the topic and in relation to the definitions of child perspective, child focus, child orientation, child-led social work, and child at the centre. The discussions were sparked by observations suggesting that the child remains invisible in society and in social work (See Qvortrup (1991; Alanen & Bardy 1990); Riihelä 2000; Forsberg 1998; Oranen 2001; Hurtig 2003.). Recently we have even witnessed the rise of a child-centred research tradition in social work. Research designs that are more accurately specified than previously have been put into use. Texts by developers on child-oriented methods have seemed to be almost competing via finely-nuanced differences, claiming one's own turf and defined concepts.

The germs of such developments have also been recognisable along our long journey of exploration. How the child perspective was finally to be studied rested with each national researcher. We decided not to get stuck in definitions at an abstract level. Instead we defined the concrete objects of where and how to study it. Each of the researchers adapted the concepts from the discussions in the research group, also from other literature and research contexts, and finally, each one has adapted what has worked for them. The outcomes from the discussions and concepts used in practice are presented and discussed in the national reports, and in the national contexts.

Birgit Mortensen (2007, 25–26) elaborates her own analysis by distinguishing a phenomenological and a structural approach to the child perspective. The phenomenological approach implies an attempt to put oneself in the child's position, to think and perceive things in the same way as children would do in their situation. The structural approach, in turn, means that children are looked at in their social context and within the framework determining their situation. In assessing the extent to which the child perspective has been applied, she (op.

cit. 153–177) returns to these concepts and analyses their limitations and variation when used in the different phases of the FGC.

Sarianna Reinikainen (2007, 11) uses two concepts: child orientation and the child perspective. Child orientation is associated with the FGC, being understood as a characteristic of the working method – describing the starting point for the work, the guiding principle in the process and the way the participating adults are expected to act. The child perspective, in turn, refers to the premises and orientation of the research. In the research, the child perspective was defined to refer to both the child's point of view of the process and the participating adults' point of view of the child in a specific situation and within the process (see Andersson & Bjerkman, 1999, 27–30; also Forsberg 2002, 27–31).

The Norwegians (Omre & Schjelderup 2008) refer to the research debate and to Emilsson & Saltell (1998), who discuss the concept of child perspective. They say that in order to understand the content of the concept, its underlying idea can be divided into two different components on which there seems to be agreement:

1. To look at things from the *child's* point of view.
2. To have the focus on the child, that is, to *see* the child.

Omre & Schjelderup (2008) link the concept with the following five dimensions: 1) The child's perspective – that is, the child's point of view, experiences, hopes and concerns (learned as directly as possible from the child); 2) the perspective on the child – that is, adults' (family members' and professionals') views (opinions and perceptions), experiences, hopes and concerns regarding the child's situation and future, with the adults attempting to put themselves in the child's position; 3) it is in the child's best interests – that is, the purpose of all actions – to ensure that the child's best interests are served. Interpretations of children's accounts of what they see as their interests and what they hope for should not be guided by the hermeneutics of doubt; 4) participation by the child – that is, the child is involved in the planning and implementation of the process, is listened to and informed and the child's views of the process are taken into account; 5) the dominant way of thinking culturally and professionally that provides us with a conceptual framework for our understanding of childhood and growth.

The Swedes (Åkerlund 2006, 7–8) associate the "rise" of the concept "child perspective" with the Convention on the Rights of the Child: With the Convention, a new concept "child perspective" was coined. Rasmusson (1994) has described the two aspects of the concept as follows: it deals with adults' perspective on children, and also with the child's own way of looking at and relating to the surrounding world. In other words, the concept has two intrinsic elements: the child-oriented perspective and the child's perspective. The key question for an individual researcher is thus to consider who it is that formulates the perspective, that is, creates the culture. As to the concept, the Swedes refer to Andersson and Bjerkman (1999), emphasising that it is necessary to keep both perspectives alive and that the child

perspective involves constant shifts between the child's perspective and various adult perspectives.

Accordingly, in an ideal case, the child perspective is obtained and fulfilled in the FGC process if the following conditions are met. This was reflected when the researcher is assessing how the child perspective became materialized:

1. the child's perspective is made visible and taken into account
2. all participants concentrate on the child's situation (focus on the child)
3. the child is involved in the planning and implementation processes
4. all participants aim to act in the child's best interests
5. adults' way of thinking includes children as subjects and recognises their knowledge, life experiences and competence

The Icelandic way of studying the child perspective followed the above conditions.

The setting and research data is summed up in figure 2. One dimension is perspectives (who's perspective; who is the informant) and the other is the level of analysing (individual or general).

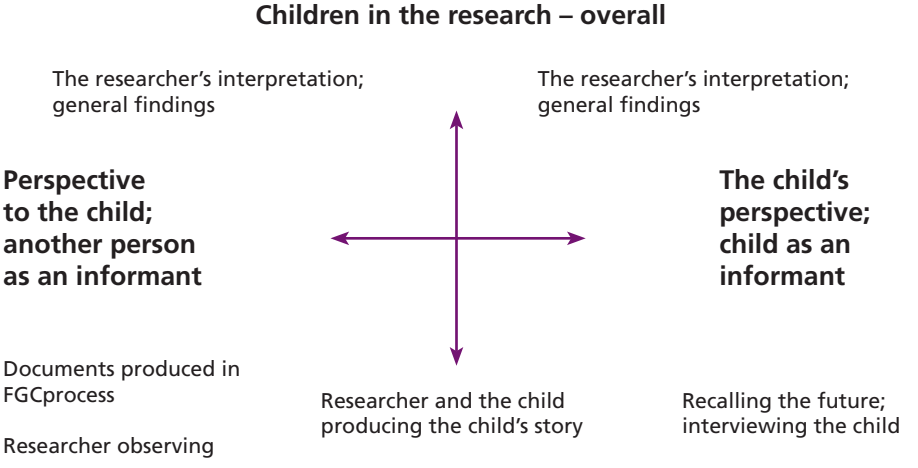


FIGURE 2. Perspectives to the child perspective in the research

Accordingly, the child perspective consists of the owner of the perspective and of the one who's interpreting it.

Encountering in private and professional networks

Originally FGC was introduced into a situation where the authority is to make a decision and where the private persons are to be heard: that is, encountering between the public and the private spheres of society (Miller & Rose 1990). One can figure the encounter between the sector-based, specialised expert system and the comprehensive everyday world, between the "system world" and "life world" by using Habermasian terminology. Tom Erik Arnkil sees this encountering as fundamentally problematic, because the one is compartmentalised and the other is not. The constitutive quality of everyday life is that it is comprehensive. The way in which the expert system has to try to make sense of the comprehensiveness, is by "slicing" it to parts that correspond to the expert system's division of labour. What is gained is deep insight into restricted phenomena, what is lost is their wider context. Thus, in the expert system around children, adolescents and families, there is a constant danger of losing sight of the life-world "fixing point" of professional tasks. This is where co-ordination dismantles: each professional carries out basic tasks based on the professional routines, without a common platform. In the best scenarios, the different sections of professional expertise fall neatly together and problem solving is helped. At worst, the professional problem-solving becomes a problem in itself (Arnkil 2003).

The process of FGC can be illustrated on a line where the sector-based, specialised and professional expert system, the "system world" public sphere, is situated above the line, and the comprehensive everyday world, the "life world" private sphere is under the line. The co-ordinator is placed in between, working as a mediator on the line; sometimes working with the professionals, though more often with the private network, and not taking sides. The arrows indicate the places and situations where encountering happens and therefore also the exchange of knowledge happens. These encounters can be seen as places for dialogue. When it comes to acquiring the research data, some of the arrows point also to the places where the Nordic researcher could concentrate on observing the child's behaviour and on listening to his or her experience and understanding in particular.

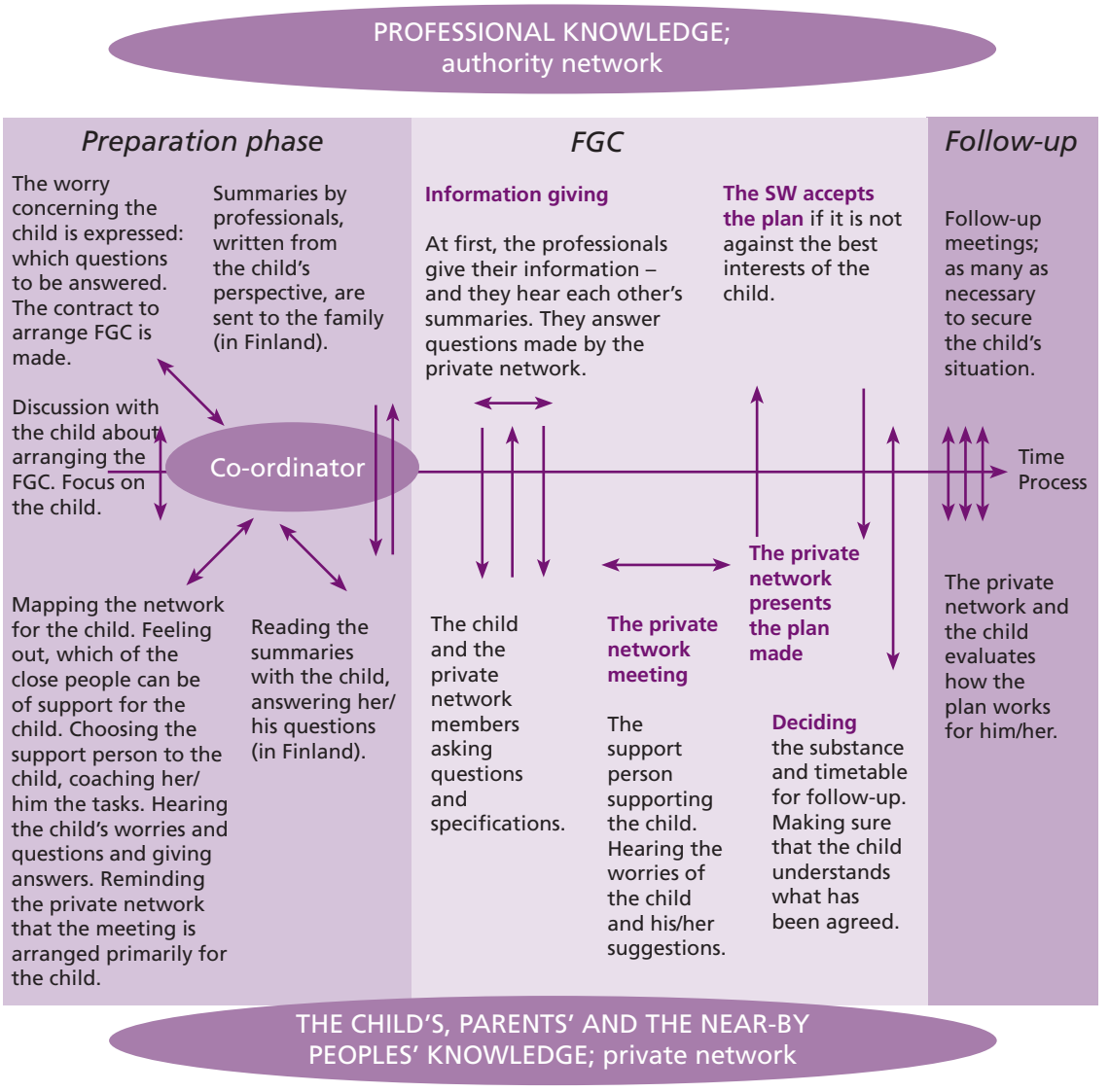


FIGURE 3. The public and private. Places for creating new knowledge and encounters between different types of knowledge during the FGC process

Dialogue. Encounters marked as arrows in the picture and following the process and phases in FGC can be seen as moments for dialogue and forums for exchanging and creating knowledge. Every marked phase includes the possibility to keep the child perspective visible and also to define it collectively, within the private or between the private and the public spheres.

William Isaacs (2001) suggests that the concept of dialogue can be distinguished from that of conversation. He defines dialogue as a process of thinking together and acquiring knowledge and that the process takes place both within and between people. In a conversation all participants bring up and defend their own points of view and attempt to convince others with their argumentation. Dialogue is conversation where there is a kernel and where no sides are taken. The aim is to look at an issue from different sides and learn more about it, and to place one's own thoughts within a wider context. The purpose of dialogue is to produce collaboration. This means that dialogue produces material for action; action continues dialogue. Dialogue is destroyed if the things that were agreed on are not accomplished later on, Isaacs (2001) states.

The etymology of the word dialogue refers to the flow of meanings between people through words. Language can be seen as (1) the language of meaning or content; (2) the language of emotions and aesthetics and (3) the language of action. Isaacs (2001) attempts to relate the functions of language with the three strong Ancient Greek values: truth, beauty and goodness. Truth would represent the language of meaning, beauty the language of subjective emotions and aesthetics and goodness the language of action and fair collaboration.

William Isaacs (2001) suggests that there are four criteria for good dialogical skills: listening, respecting, suspending opinion, and voicing. Mönkkönen (2002) underscores that dialogue requires a willingness to continuously revise one's own ways of thinking. Not even an expert can rest with "knowing". A continuous dialogue between different professional groups helps to increase knowledge about problems in one's own field and arouses curiosity about new points of view. Although it may be difficult for experts to give up their expert power, the unpredictability of interaction and contradictions between different views may also be turned into positive resources with regard to the meaningfulness of work.

Creating new knowledge together

In this research context, elements of dialogue are noticed in observations, and the idea of increasing knowledge is crucial when interviewing children. Referring to Isaacs (above), dialogue in various phases and encounters in FGC can be defined as a process of thinking together and acquiring knowledge, both from professionals and from inside the family. The dialogical process takes place both within and between people. One of the basic and important elements in FGC is that common platforms for exchanging knowledge are arranged. In a research process like this, we are dealing with dialogues on at least three levels: the actual real FGC processes in five countries; interviews with children and the process of recreating their stories; the national research processes and reflecting those at the Nordic level. The phenomena of making joint use of tacit knowledge and creating new knowledge exist on various levels.

Shayne Walker (2006), who has co-ordinated hundreds of FGCs over several years in New Zealand, has found that FGC usually creates something new, new relations and new solutions. Creating knowledge is a social process between individuals. Tacit and explicit knowledge interact and interchange with each other through social interaction, which is also the basic idea in the work of Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995 and Nonaka et al 2001). The process of knowledge conversion means the conversion of tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge. The knowledge conversion process is presented and described in relation to knowledge creation processes that relate to the FGC (Heino 2006). The FGC was then considered as a platform for creating new understanding and as a promising possibility to hear the child and to concentrate on seeking a solution from the child's perspective.

There is no direct way to knowledge co-creation with a child, as there is no such highway with and between any people. One of the prerequisites is mutual trust between the persons, while other conditions are also important. The child may not be able to or is afraid of expressing themselves, cannot find the words, or other things prevent them being in such relations (Bardy 2001; Discussions about the prenatal development, the attachment theory and research on connections between maltreatment and learning). Knowledge, especially when embedded in human relations, rarely exists inside a person as such, ready to take into use with the help of a talented interviewer. It is also created in relations, in a dialogical process.

Knowledge, also in FGC, is created between subjective subjects – children, adults, professionals. All people see subjectively and in relation to their own activity and possibilities in the situation. This is how people can understand the torrent of data that they are receiving every moment. As the Russian psychologist P.J. Galperin (1979) put it: People do not observe the world as systems of particles in interaction, but as potential fields of their own actions – and this subjectivity is essential for being able to make sense of situations.[2] The potential fields of a person's (child's) actions are connected to emotions and anticipations: what if I speak, who will react and how; what if I participate, who will react and how. A person (a child) ponders the matter in connection to his/her own relations and also, from within these relations. John Shotter (1993) has pointed out that, in addition to knowing what (something is) and knowing how (to operate), people have knowledge of a third kind, *knowing from within relationships* what those relationships are.

The FGC process provokes and is based on mixed feelings and "knowing within relationships" between children and adults, between divorced or separated parents and cohabitants, between generations, relatives and families, friends etc. Those invited to FGC have essential and *localised knowledge* concerning the child's situation; they have a bond with the historical and present circumstances of the

2 As an example, usually presented: The bear is not just a bear. It has different meanings for a person if he is hunting, looking at the animal at a zoo or meeting it suddenly in a forest. The same object in different situations lead to different meanings for the subject; the sense and conclusion varies and this leads the person to act differently. It only takes a moment, and the person has screened the possible ways to act to suit the surroundings.

family. No "outsiders" are invited; everyone is "*connected*" to the child's case. The knowledge is *specific*, near the object. In an ideal case, various points of view are to be evaluated openly, just now, between those invited to the FGC, after each of them has heard the information given by the professionals. The setting can challenge, confirm, contradict or deny the opinion of each of them and which otherwise might have become stable. It allows the *opposed knowledge* to come out. In advance, nobody can know how the unanimous plan of the private network is to be worked out and what it might consist of. As a matter of fact, this is something the authority cannot know afterwards, either – they just have to take it as it is presented.

In the Nordic research, FGC allows the studying of relationships from a child's perspective, from the near distance. It is possible to think together (Isaacs1999/2001; Bakhtin 1990), to create something new – not simply to sum up what already exists. As a matter of fact, externalising tacit knowledge does not only create new thoughts for individuals but it creates it for all, to be used in common (Nonaka). This happens in the FGC and also for the Nordic research group. It is not only a question of gathering data and combining it, it also gave a basis for new forums to feel out new combinations and new knowledge. We have been missing a forum to think together – as well as the children being missing from a forum where they can think together with the social workers.

The Nordic research setting

The Nordic research process

The following is a presentation on how the research plan developed in the Nordic research dialogues; how it was rethought, reconstructed and replanned during the process of getting nearer to the empirical work in research practice. One thing was easy to decide right from the beginning: we decided to follow the phases of FGC in the data collecting, in planning the order of posing the interview questions and in reporting. Anyhow, in acquiring more experience on how to proceed, new questions arouse. Every step opened new challenges, mostly small but also some that were more principled in nature. We met some practical realities which we just had to take; there were things we couldn't affect. These episodes, changes and turns are here described.

Remembering Gregory Bateson's (1972) wise statement, "The map is not the territory" our research was based more on the territory of practice than on the map. The "map", the plan exists and it shows the structure of procedures. Though there are organisational structures and norms to follow, one cannot identify research objects and agree on the setting up of the research without a willingness to co-operate on the part of social work practitioners and permission from the management of the respective organisations.

We had a plan about how to proceed and get in contact with clients. 'Territory' in this research context means that starting the research depends on how willing social work clients are to participate in the study. It is not possible to plan a study from beginning to end so that it could also be implemented exactly according to a plan. As for children being the objects of child welfare research, the territory means that the researcher is dependent not only on permission and help from social workers but also on the consent of parents or other custodians and also the child's willingness to participate in the research. Children cannot be detached from their environment; Research takes place within the framework of societal, interpersonal, cultural and social relations and various structural and human factors at the level of both the community and individual.

Common interests need to be found between research and researchers on the one hand and practice and practitioners on the other. Such common interests mean that some benefits are to be expected for developing practice and advancing research. In every country, a win–win research design was found and a procedure was created that linked research and practice. Common interests were found in trying to develop a method by means of which the child could be seen and listened to better and given better possibilities to participate in FGC.

The story and proceeding of the research process is described in Appendix 3, entitled "What was planned – and what happened". In Appendices 4–10 the common documents are presented.

Research themes and research questions

The child perspective turned out to be a challenging research concept to describe - what do we mean by that, how is that to be defined. It's not difficult to be unanimous about its rhetorical aspects, as well as the rhetoric and argumentation with which everybody aims at the best interests of the child. Anyhow, these concepts are given substance through concrete practice – and that practice is what we aimed to study.

We discussed the concept for several days during several research meetings. In the beginning, it seemed easy to describe what we planned to study, with the focus on the child. The child perspective was introduced as a way to orientate ourselves and the financers to FGC. We also oriented ourselves within the research process – to the child's *position* in FGC; on the child's *experiences* of FGC, on the child's *situation* and the *changes* in it following FGC and on the child's *ideas* about the FGC's significance as a process.

We began with a definition of the child perspective in FGC research and in the FGC. In November 2005 we differentiated it as:

1) *Perspective on the child* = adults' (close people's and professionals') views (opinions and conceptions), experiences, worries and hopes concerning the child's situation and future; an effort to place oneself in the child's position.
2) *The child's perspective* = the child's views, experiences, worries and hopes (as directly as possible from the child).

It includes also the child's involvement in the process in question:

3) *The child's participation* = the child is involved in the planning and implementation of the process, (s)he is listened to and informed, and her views concerning the process are taken into account.

And the three above are motivated by an effort to realise the child's best interest:

4) *The child's best interest* = the aim for the behaviour of all concerned is realisation of the child's best interest.

The focus on the child oriented us to work with the interview structure and substance: to include these themes and to follow the phases of FGC and also to follow up the main changes in the child's life over that time. By following the child's situation we wanted to explore what kind of process – or processes – FGC started. How does the plan made in FGC and its realisation change the child's situation – or does this conferencing even make any difference? We were fully aware that there

are other things happening in life – life does not revolve around making FGC plans. This was crucial in seeking the research approach and for positioning our way of doing the research.

The focus on FGC as a method that sees from a child perspective, as evaluated by the children, means getting into children's experiences as much as possible. We looked at the *outcomes* of FGC from the child's perspective, and then we believe, we could discuss how FGC should be developed as a method.

We were considering the wider use and adaptation of FGC in communities. In the end, we'll present findings that may well enrich social work. A demand for child-focused methods has been in the air, as a way to get tools for working with children; to keep the child perspective visible in action and in documentation. The timing and the space available was perfect to enable several functions to be explored:

- for studying professional work from a child perspective;
- for developing professional work to concentrate on a child perspective
- for finding ways to combine research methods and practical tools in social work.

The general aims of the Nordic research project were mostly methodological

- To seek and develop an alternative way of exploring FGC, and more generally, social work.
- To strengthen the position of research focusing on the child.
- To strengthen the position of the child and to keep child perspective visible in practical child protection social work.
- To create ways to establish dialogical settings and to carry out dialogues both between the Nordic researchers and between people in the practical settings in each country.

When we applied for funding, we introduced three main motives for the research to The Nordic Council of Ministers. Firstly, we emphasised our focus on the child. Secondly, we introduced new methods of research, to be able to study the changes from a child perspective. Thirdly, we aimed to develop FGC as a method. We also promised to initiate discussion and make suggestions concerning the development of social work in general. We ended up with three *research questions in the national research settings:*

1. What is the situation like before FGC from the child's perspective and does the situation of the child change (and how) during and after the process of FGC?
2. How do children experience FGC as a method?
3. How is the child perspective realised in FGC in practice?

All the countries except Sweden carried out the research using the research questions as presented above. In Sweden, the researcher co-operated with the practising FGC unit and they used an adapted research plan that focused on five

themes: 1) anchoring the study to the practical work, 2) child's role in inviting the FGC, 3) child's role during the FGC, 4) child's experiences of FGC and thoughts about the future, 5) child's role in the follow-up FGC. Additionally, their special focus was to study the possibilities for FGC to work as an assessment method for children who have immigrant roots.

Methodological positioning

This research can be characterised as participatory action research and as empowerment research. We do not just observe the objects, though observation is used. We interviewed the children in a way that we didn't just ask questions or discuss; rather, we tried to create a setting where the children could have the possibility to open up their thoughts and find dimensions which they did not necessarily know about before the interview. The children worked out the dimensions, which then function as the follow-up dimensions for recording the changes in the children's lives. The researchers helped the children through a set of questions and a specific way of asking. This is an intervention focused around the future and the thoughts relating to that future. Empowering elements were seen: some of the children were encouraged by attending and encountering the phases of FGC. It seemed that some children were not supported in formulating questions and sought answers from the adults and professionals.

Quantitative measures have been combined in a certain sense with qualitative discussions when interviewing the children. The Finnish researcher (Reinikainen 2007) noticed that the answers children gave to the quantitative and qualitative questions mostly confirmed each other, but sometimes they pointed to diverging experiences: the quantitative answers were somewhat more positive than the verbal descriptions. The results presented will not include quantitative reporting; the small number of cases and the lack of measurement scales does not allow for quantitative reporting. The meaning of rankings used in some of the questions was different from the traditional quantitative research: these kinds of questions were used as a method to probe deeper into the experiences and to be more exact in interviewing the children.

By looking at the changes in the dimensions as ranked by the child in previous discussions, the child was able to visibly notice their own maturing and development as a result of the follow-up study. The evaluation and views were changing in time. As a teenage boy put it:

> "I don't know… as I read this now… what I might have said then… it was a totally different time then… that… anyhow, the time has changed that… I really got the impression when I read that… I began to think that… I have changed quite a lot this year." (Reinikainen 2007.)

Traditional research assumes that researchers are the gatekeepers of knowledge and, as experts they know the questions that need to be asked (Davies 1986). In our research the children are given the power to define the dimensions of inquiry. García et al. (2003, 25) define participatory action research as ”an approach to social research in which the people being studied are given control over the purpose and procedures of the research; intended as a counter to the implicit view that researchers are superior to those they study.”

All the five national research groups belong to the qualitative ethnographic research tradition. In all the Nordic countries the approach can be described as drawing from systems theory, combined with a socio-ecological and ethnographic orientation. The research is further framed by a phenomenological approach combined with social constructivism or structuralism (as Mortensen 2007 calls it in the Danish report). Elements of grounded theory were also adapted. Åkerlund (2006, in the Swedish report) describes the inspiration as pluralism in the methodology, which means a multifaceted use of various scientific methods. In particular, the Swedish researcher (Åkerlund 2006, 13–14) recognises social anthropology with a comparitive element as a leading idea in her study. In making comparisons, she is describing pictures and counter-pictures, trying to understand the research material and phenomena. The national studies are a kind of institutional ethnography, where the FGCs can be seen as situations of institutional interaction.

The research aims at developing the practices in FGC and in social work with children. Our experiences and efforts to together join research and the practical developmental work have taught us many things. First, it is not enough to produce texts and think that this is the way of producing and processing knowledge. Producing knowledge and processing concepts in social work requires talking, feeling, feeling out, asking and discussing - including hearing many voices in dialogical settings. When pondering the authority’s right to intervene in social work and especially in child protection, transformative knowledge processes are needed to articulate different and obscure worries into questions to be solved and also to be explored, and also into the research language.

This leads to new kind of thinking about the *research material*. The question of what is material in research has widened. It means that we are positioning ourselves within a changing paradigm of social work research traditions and practices. Varied approaches, different views and many kinds of material - all the human senses are needed in exploring the phenomena of child protection, social problems, social methods and relationships (Pösö & Forsberg 2002; Sarah Pink 2001; Hurtig 2002).

We are looking towards multiple actors, dialogical settings, knowledge, the art of doing, skills, emotionally and ethically sensitive ways to respond and respectful ways to carry out research, in terms of the changes, clients and each other. Finally, the role and personal factors of the researcher seems to be essential things. Sarah Pink (2001, 18) reminds that: “Rather than being a method for the collection of ‘data’,

ethnography is a process of creating and representing knowledge (about society, culture and individuals) that is based on [an] ethnographer's own experiences. It does not claim to produce an objective or 'truthful' account of reality, but should aim to offer versions of [an] ethnographer's experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced."

In the following the Nordic research setting is introduced by positioning both the national and Nordic methodological commitments. John A. García & Paul Sivak & Shandra Tibrewal (2003) from California State University argue for the participatory action research as an alternative way to study FGC. They list some prerequisites for research on FGC to ensure that evaluation efforts are consistent with the major principles of FGDM (Family Group Decision Making, as they call FGC).[3] Empowerment as a leading concept has led to a research orientation called empowerment evaluation (Fetterman & al 1996). David Fetterman describes the empowerment evaluation model: In this participatory model key stakeholders collaboratively specify the goals and central activities of the evaluation object and produce evidence-providing documentation for evaluating the project. In our setting, we allow the children to define the goals for themselves, and the realisation of those is followed up and explored by the child and the researcher together. In that sense we can call our approach a kind of empowerment evaluation.

In looking for a new approach and method to be tested and developed in interviewing the children, we made use of our familiarity with the resource- and network-oriented dialogical methods, which have been developed and created as tools in practical contexts. These methods were adapted and developed for the Nordic research context. There are five guiding principles for the method of anticipation dialogues:

1. *Subjectivity* means that each participant is encouraged to elaborate his own point of view instead of trying to represent the overall picture. The setting emphasises that the overall picture comprises a multitude of subjective pictures. This includes a transition from objective problems into subjective concerns.
2. *Polyphony* means that the method aims to give room for all the voices to be heard in the topic.
3. *A future perspective* means that the future is actively anticipated and very little emphasis is put on the past.
4. Living in a risk society, *anticipation of consequences* is part of the basic psychological human orientation. Postmodern expertise is based on tentative anticipations and sensitivity to the fact that actions have both intended and unintended consequences.
5. *Separation of listening and speaking* is essential. Each participant has the opportunity to speak and listen without being disrupted. Usually in discussions

3 Actually I think that FGDM is better focused as a concept than FGC. The method is not only conferencing but especially, another way in the decision-making process.

people don't listen so much, they rather prepare their own speech arguments. Listening is seen as an active process that gives a person a chance to reflect on his/her own ideas.

One of these dialogical methods is called *Recalling the future*, created at STAKES (Arnkil, Eriksson & Arnkil 2001[4]). The recalling the future -method is normally used in a *network context,* in polyphonic situations in practical work. In this research it is going to be adapted – and also tested – in a research context, and not in a network but when interviewing *a child alone*.

The interview method is based on a few theoretical concepts. The aim is to follow up the process of the children's everyday life. The most essential topics are seen from the child's subjective point of view. The idea is to help the child to name those topics. The changes are to be noticed and followed up by the definition constructed by the child her/himself. The child–researcher dialogue aims at creating research companionship. A part of the research is to develop a method to explore the processes of the FGC from a child perspective.

National Research Settings

In the following, the common core of the Nordic research plan is described. In addition, each country has been free to design their own national plans, with their specific interests and settings. That was assumed to enrich the dialogical discussions between the researchers and help to complete the final results of the Nordic project.

We had some common criteria for selecting children for the study. The main criteria were that all the children were clients of child protection social work and all were of school age (range 7–17 years). Consent was the only additional criterion for selection: when the child and their parents both gave consent, the child was included in the Nordic research. We aimed at getting at least ten cases from each country (50 children in total). The final number of children participating was 39, with each country providing between 3 and 11 cases. The Family Group Conferences took place mostly in 2005.

The common core also refers to almost identical data gathering methods between countries. Each child was meant to be interviewed four times, using the same structure and content for the interviews across countries. The aim was to observe at least the first and third phases of the initial FGC meeting. Decisions on observing follow-up meetings were left up to each country. As it happened, many of those follow-up meetings were observed. In addition, the second, private phase was also observed in a number of cases. Documents detailing both the initiating

4 See also: http://www.stakes.fi/hyvinvointi/VERK/menetelmat/atterinrasig_Arnkil.pdf http://www.stakes.fi/hyvinvointi/VERK/menetelmat/early_Arnkil.pdf

questions and concerns and the final plans were gathered from all meetings. In addition, oral and written summaries given by the professionals at the meetings were documented. The common structure, data gathering and use of the various research material is presented in table 2.

TABLE 2. The phases of collecting and producing various data

Data	Before FGC (within a week)	In FGC (meeting)	After FGC (within a week)	After follow-up meeting (within a week)	One years after FGC
Inter-views	Child, 1st interview, current situation, expectations for FGC Experiences of the preparation phase		Child, 2nd interview Experiences of the FGC	Child, 3rd interview, current situation, changes in it after FGC Experiences of the follow-up meeting	Child, 4th interview current situation, changes after the follow-up meeting
Docum-ents	Questions and concerns for FGC to resolve	Summaries from the professionals Plan 1		Questions and concerns for the follow-up meeting Summaries from the professionals Plan 2	Questions, summaries and plans from the other follow-up meetings
Observ-ations		In the information-giving phases and presenting the plan, possibly in the private meeting too			
The child's story			Presented as a draft to the child, discussed and corrected	Continuing the production of the child's story	Completed story

Interviews were partly open (recalling the future) and partly semi-structured (questions about experience), see Appendix 9. Documents generated in each FGC process were also collected and content analysis applied. Triangulation was used in combining methods and in collecting the various data to focus on the research question. Triangulation from different data was also used to formulate the child's story in conjunction with the child's own thoughts.

TABLE 3. National research material; variation in the research settings

Country	Amount of children and families	Family situation	Additions to the common Nordic core in the research materials	Interviews per child; private phases observed (FGC/ of all FGC + follow up)
Denmark	10 children in 10 families, mostly adolescent	families on low income due to unemployment, single parenthood, problems with heath; broken families, many changes happened; problems with school and free time	Short inquiry after FGC to the participants about what is most important for the child concerning the FGC; Producing children's stories with some of the children	3–4 interviews; private phases 5/10 + 1
Finland	7 children in 4 families	problematic relations between child and/or family members;	Professional's written summary documents all available. Producing children's stories with every child	3–4 interviews; private phases 3/4 + 3
Iceland	3 children in 3 families; all of them 13 years old	various family relations; neglected children or showed risk behaviour; involved in CPS for years	Producing children's stories with all of the children	4 interviews; private phases 3/3 + 0
Norway	11 children in 7 families, 7–15 years old	every child from a single-parent family; some of them have been placed outside home; neglect (4); risk behaviour (1); new clients (6)	Producing children´s stories after first interview with all children.	4 interviews; private phases 7/7 + 5
Sweden	8 children in 7 families, (3 children moved away after the 2nd interview	families with immigrant backgrounds; cultural and other problems	Interviewing co-ordinators before the FGC about their view of the role of the child in FGC-process; Observing the preparative meeting between co-ordinator and the family; interviewing younger children using the life-line method, recalling the future was used only with the adolescents;	2–3 interviews; private phases 7/7

The data gathered in the Nordic countries are presented in table 3. The number of cases and a rough description of the basic family situations are included. The variation and differences in cases (in the family situations and in the age of the children) across the national research settings is visible. Additional material is presented, as is the amount of observed FGC and follow-up conferences in each country.

Children's interviews

Children were to be interviewed four times: 1) at least one week prior to the FGC, 2) within one week of the FGC, 3) within one week of the first follow-up meeting and 4) one year after the FGC. The changes are followed up specifically at the third and fourth interviews.

In Sweden there were less interviews per child carried out than in the other countries; the follow-up time was also a bit shorter. Interview material also differed in Sweden in the sense that they included additional interviews with the co-ordinators. In Sweden, the interviews concerning younger children made use of the life-line method instead of 'recalling the future'.

The idea was for only the child and the interviewer to be present. It was discussed at length what should happen if the parent did not allow the child to be interviewed alone. We decided that if the children or their parents explicitly requested it, the child's support person or parent could also be present. But what happened? Surprisingly, no problems at all, the researchers were welcomed to interview the children alone, with some discussions on the matter arising in a few cases.

The interviewer/researcher who interviewed the child for the first time also carried out the subsequent interviews. The researcher did not belong to the agency staff and she was in that sense impartial. It is more likely that a confidential rapport will develop between the interviewer and the child if the same researcher meets the child beforehand who also attends the FGC meetings and does the later interviewing. It also makes it possible for the researcher to approach each interview with the benefit of information from the previous encounter.

Before the first interview the researcher becomes acquainted with the questions that are to be addressed by the social worker. However, they listen to the child's ideas and experiences first, without directing discussion to the matters that have been earmarked for the FGC. They have the questions only to be able to ask at the end of the interview for the child's opinion on those matters that express the concerns of the social worker. The questions to be addressed by the FGC are the only information the interviewer has concerning the case prior to the interview, and they also make this clear to the child.

While interviewing, the researchers were guided not to keep in mind the motivations and questions that are written in the documents of FGC and especially not to let them guide the encounter with the child. Those questions were to be looked at in more detail when it was their turn in the interviews. The purpose is to keep apart the worries and questions as defined by adults (social worker and parents) and put forward to the FGC. The adults' definitions will only come forth through the child in as much as the child has heard and internalised those as her/his own. *In the interviews a qualitative and quantitative*[5] *approach are combined.* The child is an active and creative subject in the research, studying the changes in their own life at the same time as also being the object of the research. The traditional setting of 'researcher and research object' changes to a dialogical one: the child explores their own situation and experiences together with the researcher; they are partners in research.

The changes in the child's situation are followed up in a non-traditional way. Though the frame is given and the method is led by the researcher, *the contents are defined by the child. The dimensions are not defined by the researcher in advance*, and they are not the same for all children. Instead, each child defines their own follow-up dimensions by describing the things that are significant to their well-being (and that are not satisfactory at the moment). The purpose is to obtain dimensions that are defined in a relevant way and from the child's perspective. The child also ranks the dimensions – both the situation within each dimension and also the mutual order of importance of dimensions, making it easier for the child and for the interviewer to focus on the changes. Before each interview the interviewer re-examines the content of the child's previous interviews, and also draws the child's attention to the same.

The first part of the *first interview* session deals with the child's life situation. The focus is on how the child sees and experiences their own situation, what happens in their life and what belongs to it from their perspective, what they are worried about – what they hope to see changed in their life. The interview method used in this part of the interview is called "recalling the future" (see later). Along with recalling the future, the subjective and individual follow-up dimensions for the case are defined based on what the child says.

Next, though still in the first interview session, the FGC that is under preparation is discussed. Here the purpose is to explore the child's ideas on why the FGC is being arranged and their opinions on the aims and the questions that are defined within the FGC and what their own expectations for the FGC are. The child is asked about their experiences of the preparation of the FGC and especially about their own participation in the various stages of planning during the preparation. Questions focus separately on the "facts" and on the "experiences", although they are connected in the child's mind (observations and understanding of what has happened and how things are vs. feelings and opinions that arise as a result of

5 Not quantitative in a traditional sense.

TABLE 4. The structure and focus of the interviews

Interview 1 Before FGC	Interview 2 After FGC (the meeting)	Interview 3 After the follow-up meeting	Interview 4 One year after FGC
Introduction	**Introduction**	**Introduction**	**Introduction**
The child's experience of their own situation; experienced changes to happen (with help of 'Recalling the future') -> definition of things for the good future to be followed-up, and ranking them from today's perspective		The child's experience of her/his own situation and of changes after the FGC (realisation of the plan) -> follow up the things for the good future (redefined), and ranking them from today's perspective	The child's experience of their own situation and of changes after the follow-up meeting (realisation of the plan) -> follow up the things for the good future (redefined), and ranking them from today's perspective
The child's experiences of the preparation phase of FGC	The child's experiences of FGC (the meeting)	The child's experiences of the follow-up meeting	The child's experiences of FGC as a process?
The child's ideas on and experiences of participation and responsibility in FGC/ in general	The child's ideas and experiences of participation and responsibility in FGC/ in general	The child's ideas and experiences of participation and responsibility in FGC/ in general	The child's ideas and experiences of participation and responsibility in FGC/ in general
A measuring scale for general well-being		A measuring scale for general well-being	A measuring scale for general well-being
Ending – talk about the next interview	Ending – talk about the next interview	Ending – talk about the next interview	Ending – talk about the reporting of the research

what has happened). At the end of the interview the child is asked to describe well-being on that day along two lines: how they experience their "internal" and their "external" well-being.

In the *second interview* session (soon after the FGC) the child is asked about their ideas on and experiences of the recent FGC and what they hope and expect to change in their own life now after the FGC.

In the *third interview* session (soon after the first follow-up meeting) the child is asked about their experiences of the follow-up meeting, how their situation has changed during the time between the FGC and the follow-up meeting, and

what they hope and expect to change now after the follow-up meeting. Here the dimensions that were produced in the first interview session are reviewed with the child, and they rank them from their current perspective.

In the *fourth* (one year after the first FGC) *interview* session the child is asked how their situation has changed during the follow-up period, and again the previously produced dimensions are reviewed and re-ranked. In addition, the child is asked about their ideas and experiences of what particular role and significance the FGC has had in initiating and promoting those changes.

In the interviews, the scenario of the good future that the child subjectively raises when "recalling the future" is dealt with separately from the aims that are set for the FGC. The follow-up also focuses on both of them separately. The purpose is to find out if the questions addressed in the FGC – the concretised concerns of the social worker (and the parents) – are the same as the child's concerns. That is, when defining the questions, to what extent is the child's point of view included in the process from the very beginning?

The realisation of a good future as described by the child is followed up side by side with the realisation of the plan made in the FGC. If the adults' definitions of the problem and the procedures that follow (i.e. the plan and its realisation) are different from the child's experience of the situation and their hopes, it is interesting to find out what actually changes from the child's point of view and how the child experiences those changes. On the other hand, when following up the child's situation "beyond" the questions addressed by the FGC, it is possible to realise significant changes that are not related to or dependent on the realisation of the plan made in the FGC.

When recalling the future the child

1) *imagines* how the things are after a year (or another defined point in time) when they are fine from her/his perspective,
2) *imagines* who helped her/him and how and what (s)he did to bring about good changes, and
3) *defines* her/his past worries as if from the future (actually thus defining his/her today's worries).

The "recalling the future" –method has initially been developed as a tool for client situations in which the purpose is to produce a plan together among various actors. It bears a resemblance to a solution-based approach. The focus in a solution-based interview is on the future, not in the present (see de Shazer 1991; Berg 2000). The method also differs: it addresses present worries. The future is outlined as functioning in a satisfactory way, when solutions have been found to all the essential problems. However, the method does not focus only on the future; rather, today's worries and problems are approached as if retrospectively. That is to let possible solutions dominate the future vision rather than letting present problems

overshadow it (Arnkil & Eriksson & Arnkil 2000, 139). When worries and problems are approached from the angle of a positive future vision they are experienced as less threatening than if they are described as being in the here and now.

In this Nordic FGC-research, the recalling the future –method is used as a tool in children's interviews. The idea is to explore the child's situation and experiences as defined by her/himself and to produce dimensions for the follow-up of her/his situation. The point in time that is to be assumed and imagined is chosen to be e.g. a year after FGC. Still, a specific question is how the child understands the concept of time. The point in time that the child is asked to imagine, has to be defined case by case, and it can also be illusive. The most important thing is that the child imagines and places her/himself in the future, to a point when time has passed and many things are different and better than now. The child is helped to bring her/his thoughts into the future/the defined point in time in different concrete ways and by setting milestones for the passage of time. Things like the season in question and things related to it, the child's age and school grade at the time, how the child has grown and how (s)he can do some things better than before can be raised and described with the child.

The purpose of placing thoughts into the future is to create distance to the problematic and worrying present and to free the child to imagine a better life situation. The interviewer's task is to motivate and help the child to start this mental play with the interviewer, to imagine her/himself in a situation in which the good changes are a realised fact. This may take a while and require persuasion, especially if it is difficult for the child to imagine her/himself in a situation in which things are well or even a little better for her/him.

There were only three main questions to put to the children:

1. A year has passed and things are quite well. How are they for you? What are you especially happy about?
2. What did you do to bring about this positive development – and who helped you and how? What can you – at least secretly – be proud of?
3. What made you worried "a year ago" and what lessened your worries

All these main questions are followed by specifying and concretising questions. The aim was to stick to open questions and to help the child to describe both the good situation and the processes that have led there in as detailed a way as possible.

As can be seen, the activity on the part of the child is also addressed in addition to the supportive network (cf. the more passive "miracle question" by Berg 2000). The process of naming the dimension is co-operative.

The interviewer must concentrate on and be careful not to start using "if-language" her/himself ("If things were well, how would they be?" or "If everything turned out fine and this and that would happen…" etc.). Instead, the interviewer must help the child to imagine the situation WHEN things are well. How are they

then? The interviewer must not push to themes or solutions (here the interviewer must try to keep distance to the things that (s)he has read from the documents). But, specifying questions (in present and imperfect) that arise from the child's answers are important. With the help of those the child is asked to concretise a good situation and describe it in as much detailed as possible, in the different life areas.

The child speaks and the interviewer repeats aloud what the child says (as in therapy, the therapist helps the client to express and give names to the experiences) and writes down the expression the child uses in the child's language without adult conceptualisation (Riihelä 1996). After writing down the child's own expressions, the interviewer may suggest another formulation if it is necessary to clarify the idea. If the child has for example described, in her/his own language, that (now when the situation is good) there isn't fighting and shouting at home all the time etc., the interviewer may ask the child if that could be named as "mother and father in harmony", if that is what (s)he means. Thus the child hears the thing she spoke of as formulated by the interviewer, and (s)he can specify and correct the interviewer's interpretation (Reinikainen 2007).

These things that are named with the child create dimensions for each case-based follow-up. At the end of recalling the future the child is asked to give today's "ranks" for these named dimensions: if in the future, when things are well, a dimension's rank is e.g. in the right edge of the line segment, where is it now? Dimensions produced like this are a tool for following up the child's subjective experience of her/his own situation. Also the child is told that the things that (s) he has now raised will be reviewed and re-evaluated in the following interview sessions, and the meaning is to follow how the situation, as described by those things, has changed / developed.

After the child has described a future situation in which everything is all right, (s)he is asked to tell who gave support and what kind of support was given to change things for the better, and what (s)he her/himself did to bring about the good changes. The interviewer gets back to the concerns the child raised before (the named dimensions) and for each of them, (s)he asks what kind of support the child got in the matter and from whom, so that it turned out well. In their minds, the child and the interviewer are still in a future situation in which everything is all right. The persons the child mentions (relatives, friends, professionals) and the support (s)he describes are written down on paper (e.g. the person is written next to a named dimension, and next to the persons, the means of support). In the follow-up interviews it is interesting to review these too, and look, together with the child, at if and how the persons and the means of support (s)he imagined when recalling the future, are any similar to those that were realised in practice after FGC.

At the end, the child and the interviewer return to the time when the child/ the family/the social worker had concerns, and it had been decided to arrange an

FGC. The child is asked to "recall" the past situation (which in reality is the present situation) and the problems and concerns (s)he had then. The idea is, that after first describing a good situation and raising/imagining her/his own and other people's resources, it is easier for the child to talk about today's concerns and problems and to specify and explore those with an interviewer. In the light of the concerns and problems the child now defines, the above-produced dimensions are reviewed again. If the child raises a new concern, it is added to a dimension-list. Last, the interviewer asks the child: What was it that made your concerns go away/lessen a year (or another point in time) ago? What happened?

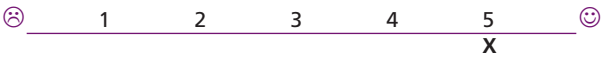
After all three questions are done, the interviewer went back to the things that the child has presented concerning both the good future and the concerns. The children were asked to rate the situation with regard to these things using a 1–5 scale; the ratings concern a good future (desired state) on the one hand and the time of the interview on the other. One (1) signified that they considered the thing was extremely bad, five (5) that it was extremely good. Finally they were asked to put the things in the order of importance – with the most significant placed first. They were also told that the things would be covered again in the subsequent interviews.

In the subsequent interviews the researcher made use of the paper prepared in the preceding interview. The children's previous ratings could be discussed and the things that had been marked as important were returned to. This also helped the children assess the "amount" and direction of change: that is, their own experience of it. For example, if the child had given the situation under discussion a rating of 3 before the FGC and 3½ a few months later (i.e. perceived some improvement in the situation), the previous ratings could be made use of in considering to what extent and in which direction the situation had changed during the follow-up period and whether the situation had further improved, remained roughly the same, or got worse. Some children spent a long time considering what the current "rating" of a thing or situation would be, looking at it in relation to their previous ratings or the rating for "a good future". After discussing the direction and amount of change, the researcher further asked the children to consider what had caused the change (Reinikainen 2007, 47–49).

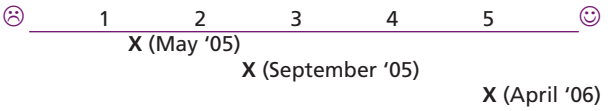
Reinikainen (2007, 48) uses a time line to describe the changes. The picture 1 shows an example of the realisation of a desired change during the research. The thing to be followed, as named by the child, was "living (independently) in supported accommodation".

PICTURE 1. Living (independently) in supported accommodation. Changes from the child's perspective.

In the good future:



Currently (during the follow-up period):



The change in this example was very positive at the end of the FGC process. The data also includes other kinds of experiences.

With the help of recalling the future together with the child, the "follow-up dimensions" have been produced for the changes that the child expects and hopes. The child has by her/himself, with help of an interviewer, named concerns that are significant for her/his own well-being. (S)he has also defined how far today's situation is from the situation of the future, concern by concern. These things are reviewed and re-ranked after the follow-up meeting and finally in the last interview.

It is important to realise that the recalling the Future –method is also an intervention. When the child is asked to imagine a desirable future situation and also who are involved in improving the situation and how, it guides and prepares the child for the forthcoming FGC. As a matter of fact, there were children who even reported having been strengthened (empowered) through receiving help to clarify the situation for himself.

Documents

The documents produced in the process of the FGC were collected and the texts analysed. Those documents were:

1. the agreement for arranging the FGC along with the questions or worries addressed by the social worker
2. oral and/or written summaries of professionals. If the professionals did not deliver the text in advance or in the information phase of the FGC, but gave the information orally, it was written down by the researcher
3. the plan
4. same documentation from follow-up meetings.

No other case documents were studied. We were only interested in the formulations in the FGC documents and their use.

The use of the documents is two-fold. First, they are used in children's interviews. When meeting the child for the first time, the researcher has beforehand familiarised themselves with the questions prepared for the FGC. When the children are asked about their ideas/experiences of the FGC – about its purpose and the realisation of that purpose – the discussion may continue by comparing the actual questions with how the child has understood them. When meeting the child for the second time, the researcher is also familiar with the plan made in the FGC. Similarly, when meeting the child for the third time, they are familiar with the plan made in the follow-up meeting. These questions and plans are discussed with the child at the end of the interviews.

Second, the documents represent the adult's (and agency) point of view. The adult's way of putting things can be compared to the child's, while differences can be studied through the documents and through the interviews.

The tradition of making and delivering written summaries for the family before the FGC is used only in Finland. That means, in Finland both documents prepared beforehand and oral summaries in the information phase are available as research material.

Observations

Instructions for making observations were produced following discussion within the research group. The themes to observe were decided. To begin with, a drawing is done of how the participants sit in relation to each other and observations on how they choose their seats; focus is given to the child. Secondly, observations are made of the reactions and role of the child, of body language and of the direction of questions, from whom to whom. Episodes and surprises were marked, while the atmosphere and any changes in it were described.

The national reports include some descriptions about observing. The observation methods seemed to vary between the countries, but the focus was kept on the child. The variations or emphasis is reported as follows:

> In Denmark the role of the children was central: it was observed when they said something; when some person said something directly to the child; when other people talked to each other about the child; and how the child reacted during the meeting. The role of the child's support person was also studied (Mortensen 2007, 38).

> In Iceland the child's participation was especially observed and coded: how people talked to the child and how the child responded to the others both verbally and non-verbally during the meeting (Freysteinsdóttir & Árnadóttir 2007, 3).

> In Sweden observation focused on the interaction between the child and others during the meeting, with the child's participation studied from various aspects. Special attention was given to initiatives made by the child in the meeting; which persons orientated themselves to the child; how did the child react and orientate to the discussion and to various questions? (Åkerlund 2006, 19–20)
>
> In Finland the child was the focus. Attention was given to how the children participated in the meeting; how did adults make/help them to participate; what was the position of the child within the private network (Reinikainen 2007, 34)
>
> In Norway the observations were primarily focused on the structures and processes concerning the situation and role of the child (Omre & Schjelderup 2008).

As reported before, we planned to observe only the first and third phases of the FGC (the information-giving phase and the presentation of the plan phase). To our surprise, the families also very willingly welcomed the researchers into the private phase – and on experiencing a couple of these phases, we were happy to have further opportunities. The decision on whether to attend the private phase was made beforehand, after careful discussion. With the limited resources, it was thought that only a few deeper case studies would be included, but in fact this was possible in all cases. This is discussed later in more detail.

One motive for observing in the FGC was to explore how a child's perspective is realised in practice (the third research question). For that purpose we listed beforehand the things to be observed. The other motive for observing in the FGC was to help the interviewer (who is the same person as the observer) to prepare for the interviews exploring the child's experiences of the meetings (the second and third interviews). By observing the FGC, the interviewer on the one hand obtained information that supported and completed (or questioned) what the child revealed in the interview, and on the other hand, ideas that would be relevant in later interviews with the child. The interviewer also has the possibility to gauge the atmosphere of the meetings, and the way the child and the other participants participate. These observations and interpretations could then be discussed with the child and the child's own interpretation explored.

The observations were seen as a good starting point from which to discuss the child's experiences, thoughts and feelings. Further, observations made it possible to study the "quantity" of different participants' participation – for example the number of speaking turns they take and their length as well as the "quality", for example, who they addressed when they spoke.

Observations in the meetings may have had a significant effect on the child's interviews. This has been discussed in the national reports. Often the interviewer

had something in mind to ask the child, to enable the child to express how they felt about a situation where something happened or something significant was said, or just for them to comment on it.

There appear to have been no great differences between the countries in the manner of observations made during the meetings. In Sweden, additional observation material was gathered. Meetings between the co-ordinator and the family were observed in the phase where the first discussion between these actors took place.

Child's stories as research material

Producing the child's story (narratives) serves several functions. First, detailing the child's point of view helps in the analysis and in keeping the focus on both the changes for the child and on the developing story. Second, constructing the story and sharing it with the children can make them visible, which can strengthen them as actors and as subjects. The process can help to empower them, helping them participate in and get a better grasp of their own situation. As such, the research constitutes an intervention.

After the first FGC meeting and in preparation for the second interview the researcher wrote a short narrative based on the data gathered so far. It was produced by taking the child's comments from the interview and including the other material (questions; observations). This story was given to the child to read or, for the younger children, the researcher would read it aloud.

A third function of the story was to allow the children to comment and verify and validate the story as their own. Fourth, this made it possible to use the story as a research tool to describe the experiences and the changes from the child's perspective.

The idea of producing the stories is based on the experiences of previous research (Heino 1997), where triangulated and multi-faceted data gathered from child protection cases and reconstructed as stories were offered back to social workers. This tool for constructing the child's story was not used in Iceland and in Sweden. To illustrate the method one story is presented as Appendix 11.

Nordic Research material

The main material for this concluding report consists of several sources:

- Papers prepared for research meetings – and papers produced during the meetings.
- Dialogues in research meetings – ten meetings (1–3 per year), the documented discussions from the meetings/TH (10–20 pages from each meeting), notes from each meeting (5–9 pages) TH/SR.

- Papers written for the Nordic Conferences, and other texts by project members concerning the project (four conference books).
- National research reports (five reports).

Discussions from the Nordic research meetings were documented at the time. Afterwards, memos were produced that detailed the discussion points (where there were any) and conclusions.

E-mails were used actively to varying extents in planning and carrying out the research. There were periods of high activity and also calmer seasons. It happened that while one researcher might have been eager to hear about another's experiences, or that researchers were often at different phases of the research or that there were other work commitments, the responses did not always meet hopes or expectations.

A research discussion forum was set up to serve as a peer group and as a platform for comparing experiences, as well as for developing the research proceedings. It can also be seen as a benchmarking forum.

The dialogues between researchers formed an essential part of the material and the analysis in the research, especially when looking at how the child's perspective was realised in practice and how the method was working.

Frame for analysis

Reporting results concerning the child's position in the private meeting is based both on the findings reported in the national studies and on the discussions that reflected on the findings. I noticed when organising the report, or discussing the material in the themed sessions and when analysing it, that the themes emphasised in the research discussions were different to those explicitly emphasised in the written reports. It was then that Nonaka & Takeuchi's notion of the spiral of producing knowledge came alive to my mind (See also Heino 2007, 55–74). The tacit and explicit knowledge blend into each other in the deepened circles shared in the research group. I call it *producing knowledge through dialogue.* As described before, FGC itself forms a forum for thinking together, for explicit and tacit knowledge to transform into each other; and it happens in the interviews with the children. Here the same frame is used in the third level, in the reflections between the Nordic research group members.

The Nordic correspondence and meetings offered possibilities to share the tacit and explicit findings, to try to articulate with words what each researcher feels. Feelings are regognised to be an important source of knowledge in organisation development (Hirschorn 1988). In the encounters the researchers may recognise similarities and act as a means of progressing and expressing the findings. We can say that we saw supplementary and additional themes emerge, more so than if we

had only followed the research plan and reported it nationally in each country. It was via the reflections we achieved the Nordic results.

Creating knowledge through social interaction is the basic idea in the work of Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995 and Nonaka et al 2001). It is a social process between individuals where tacit and explicit knowledge interact and interchange with each other. The process of knowledge conversion (SECI-process) means the conversion of tacit knowledge (T) and explicit knowledge (E). The process of creating knowledge out of observations and feelings in the black box is presented using Nonaka's concepts in the following (see Figure).

The term *socialisation* emphasises the importance of joint activities, in the process of converting new tacit knowledge through shared experiences. Since tacit knowledge is context specific and difficult to formalise, transferring tacit knowledge requires sharing the same experience (observing the FGCs). Mutual trust and physical proximity are important elements in socialisation.

Through *externalisation* tacit knowledge is articulated, it becomes crystallised, thus available to be shared by others. Tacit knowledge is expressed and translated into such forms as metaphors, concepts, hypothesis, diagrams, models, or prototypes that can be understood by others. Yet expressions are often inadequate, inconsistent, and insufficient. Such discrepancies and gaps between images and expressions can help to promote "reflection" and interaction between individuals. In externalisation, existing tacit knowledge is made visible in different ways, by various methods (by sharing and talking about the surprises experienced in the black box).

Actually, this method of making the experiences visible by asking about surprises worked very well. The researchers were asked to reflect on the findings experienced in the private meeting by recalling what surprised them. That is also how we get to know about our anticipations, a kind of tacit hypothesis the researcher has. In relation to both explicit and tacit anticipations, it was easier to recognise the observations and findings. The researchers identified several surprises.

The surprise theme guided the research discussions deep into the experiences, into the role of a researcher and into their attitudes. Being present in strong, serious and intensive processes taught many things, the researchers were also touched at a personal level. "I learned a lot in the black box – about social work and about myself. I have thought about it a lot afterwards. What a narrow perspective we have in social work!" (I; D, F, N, S)

The researcher may have distrusted the resources the family had to cope with in making the plan. In the research dialogue, she confessed to herself and to the group how surprised she was about how little trust she had beforehand: "Families were so strong, all of them, in different ways. I thought it would take one hour, but it took 4–5 hours. I was surprised how they really tried to solve the thing, tried to find solutions". Other comments were "They were just like us!" or "The private phase is a network meeting, well organised. It has the capacity to bring the

plan to the professionals. Family members without any professional education can nevertheless handle the question. Social workers underestimate everyday people. Impressed." (I, F, N)

"One of the big surprises was that the families in every country invited the researchers into their meetings so easily, so naturally. The researchers have generally defined it as very private. So, it was very exiting – and privileged for the researchers! (N)

In *combination* (the process of converting explicit knowledge into more complex and systematic explicit knowledge), knowledge is exchanged and combined through, for example, documents, meetings, and computerised communication. Reconfiguring existing knowledge through sorting, adding, combining, and categorising can create new knowledge (memos and drafts by e-mail). Combination can also include the "breakdown" of concepts and producing concept maps. In combining the different kinds of knowledge one may construct the foundation and motivation for a common understanding, says Nonaka.

Internalisation (the process of embodying explicit knowledge into tacit knowledge) is closely related to "learning by doing". Explicit knowledge has to be embodied in action and in practice (testing how the produced check lists work in practice, gain experiences). Internalised knowledge is used to broaden, extend, and reframe organisational members' tacit knowledge. A benefit emerges when the people have internalised knowledge into a tacit form and adapted to the shared mental models or practical routines. In internalisation, the new practices become automatic and they form the base for new tacit knowledge.

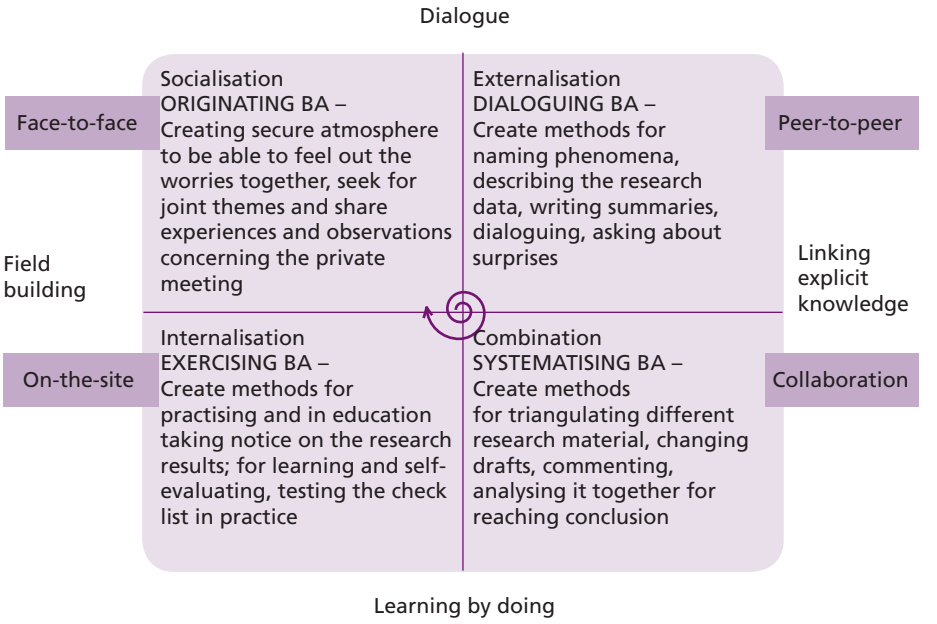
Tacit knowledge accumulates at the individual level and is in turn shared with others through socialisation – setting off a new spiral of knowledge creation (for example, developing FGC further; testing the findings to be able to coach the child, the support person, family members etc. in preparation for the meeting; thinking through the national results in the Nordic contexts).

Nonaka has a special concept for the time and space for knowledge creation: Ba is Japanese and it means a platform where knowledge is created, shared, and exploited. The term refers to a physical, mental, and virtual space or any combination of these: time and space including the space for interpersonal relations; space that is shared by individuals or by institutions and organisations. The most important element in ba is interaction. The process to create knowledge is at the same time the process to create ba. To take part in ba, means to commit oneself to the process and to cross one's own perspectives and limits or borders. We may think that in taking part in FGC it means we commit ourselves to the process and that we have a special possibility to let ourselves hear and observe other kinds of things than we usually do. According to Nonaka, knowledge is embedded in ba, where it is then acquired through one's own experience or reflections on the experiences of other participants. Knowledge includes meanings. If knowledge is separated from ba, it turns into information, which can then be communicated independently from

ba. Information resides/exists in the media and the Internet, whereas knowledge resides in ba (see Nonaka et al. 1995 and 2001).

There are four types of ba: originating, dialoguing, systematising, and exercising. Each type supports a particular mode of knowledge conversion between tacit and explicit knowledge, and offers a platform for a specific step in the knowledge spiral process. If we understand various types of ba, it may be easier to create special spaces, and therefore, to support each mode of knowledge conversion and help knowledge creation more consciously.

We created several ba's during the process. The last dialoguing ba (a place and time for exchanging experiences and findings) was created in the last research meeting that lasted for an entire week. We could work and live together. Creating a *systematising ba* required methods for bringing together and analysing the huge amount of qualitative material – both tacit and explicit – including the national reports.



If we try to see the learning process as a spiral, it is also important that the new achievements become known, become adopted in practical contexts and developed further. The private network learns from its experience as do the professionals in FGC. Here the focus is on how the researchers succeed in getting considered and reliable outcomes from the dialogical process.

Reporting the very unique FGCs case by case does not work, so the question is how do we generalise. Some thought a typology would work, though some thought

it inadequate and were suspicious of it. The number of themes and meaningful variations may be lost if the material is forced to fit into preconceived boxes. Some saw that using typologies could mean applying normative thoughts to how a process would appear. Some asked if it is possible to produce an un-normative typology. Nevertheless, some typologies or categorisation or generalisation was used already in the national reports.

Several findings were about what happens in the black box, what kinds of processes or phases are noticed, how the children participate, and how the private network produces the plans, what is the atmosphere and what kind of roles do the network members take. Additionally one can read many thick descriptions that speak for themselves. Every good story talks to our emotions (Parry 1998). For instance

> At times the discussion became heated and turned into a dispute between the child and the parent. When talking about the child's biggest cause of concern – the mother's drinking – the other family members backed the child up strongly, trying to make the parent see the situation from the child's point of view. When the parent and the child argued about the everyday routines, such as household chores, the support person specified the issues discussed from different sides, acting as a mediator in the dispute. Plenty of time was spent discussing the criteria of a good home life and the need for everyone to do their part. At one stage, one of the family network members turned to the mother, who had been criticised a lot, and said that they all know that the children mean everything to her. She also pointed out it was the other way too. "You know those kids love you more than anything else?" The mother had tears in her eyes. "Of course I know that." Towards the end of the meeting, even after some rather heated disputes, one of the family network members spoke warmly about how all these children who are related to each other are different from each other but each one is good as they are. "Like our child is capable and strong-willed, [while your child is] artistic and [our older one is] empathic" … One of the family network members proposed that the plan should include something that everyone would be responsible for. The whole family would be responsible for controlling their temper. "So that you don't at once need to flare up at each other." Another network member reminded everyone that this meeting was also about caring and summed up the results of the meeting in an encouraging way. The most important thing is that everyone understands what the situation is and wants to improve it. "Everyone here is important and dear to each other." (Reinikainen 2007, 101–102).

To sum up

Data collection began in Denmark at the end of 2004, followed by Finland and Sweden. Due to the varied beginning, the time for everyone to finish with the last interview for the research is also different. The last part of the national empirical data was gathered in 2007.

TABLE 5. Proceeding at the Nordic research level in the project

Researcher dialogues & reflections	Before data gathering	In the beginning of data gathering	When the data has been gathered	When analysing and reporting nationally	When drafting the Nordic report
In meetings	Planning (4 common meetings in 2003-04)	Reflecting the experiences of pilot interviews, planning the analysis (Feb. 2005)	Reflecting the experiences of data gathering, planning the case analysis (2 meetings in 2005; one in 2006 and in 2007)	Reflecting the analysing the data and outcomes (2006–2008)	Reflecting the national outcomes and reporting, completing the Nordic report together 2007–2008
By e-mail	Constantly (active peaks)	Constantly (active peaks)	Constantly (becoming selective)	Selectively	More focused in themes to report

This research is practice research. It is not carried out in any research chamber but in connection to and in co-operation with the practice field, discussing the choices and findings all the way through. In addition, our setting (wider, reflective groups in each country) includes actors and larger activity outside the actual research field: from education, development, social work and administration or government in each country.

We have had in all 10 Nordic research group meetings. We have both saved time and money and maximised the benefits by connecting some of the meetings to International, European or Nordic conferences on FGC, or to other seminars where most of the group members would have already participated. Doing so, we have been visible (as a group or as an individual) in these contexts, but most important in the sense of research, writing papers has helped bring out the ideas. Several papers have been produced during the project by the researchers and other project members. We surprised even ourselves by collecting and presenting all

published items, books, articles, papers, lectures and other outputs. All activity is visible in the Appendix 1.

The method to conclude and report the Nordic findings has been a combination of meta- research and dialogue. Dialogues have guided the research process, especially towards the end, in concluding the final reflections for the Nordic report. In this phase I collected the results reported in the five national reports,[6] and wrote a draft for the final meeting. The Nordic level in reporting has meant a structured working method with some variations led by an outstanding consultant in May 2007. The final reporting of the Nordic research was done without the final manuscript of the Norwegian research report in autumn 2008. The research process has been a social process between Nordic researchers. Creating the Nordic results and the report can be described with help of spiral circles in the research process (Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995).

The whole research setting appears as follows:

TABLE 6. The Research Setting

Research question	Data	Analysing	Discussion
Changes	Interviews documents observations Child's story	Things to be changed in RF, defined by the child; scales as instruments in interviews. Plans made in FGC and in follow-up. Constructing the story in dialogue with the child and data.	What are the changes (child - adult persp), how to study them, what leads to changes?
Experiences	Interviews documents observations Child's story	Experiences in the data; triangulation in constructing the story in dialogue with the child and data (observations).	Suggestions for better FGC
Child perspective	Interviews documents observations Child's story	Realised in each case, and more generally in cases. Analysing with the data. Comparing cases. Content analysis of professional's summaries and observations in FGC. Producing the child's story.	Suggestions for better (social) work with children
Other	Nordic discussions Nordic reports	Themes in dialogue, using various methods.	Suggestions for research from child perspective and with children

6 I had the Swedish report printed (in Swedish) and an article by Eva Nyberg in English describing the research; the Finnish report in Finnish, the Danish report as a manuscript in Danish, the master thesis of Hervör Alma Árnadóttir in Icelandic and a summary of it in English; first notices from the Norwegian temporary report were to hand when I prepared the summary for discussion.

Evaluation

Everyone who has conducted a lengthy collective research undertaking, especially bringing together participants from several different countries, will have experienced both the joy of co-creating new understanding and of inventing methods and settings, as well as feeling, at least on occasion, impatient in trying to achieve the cross-reading, commenting and mutual decision-making in a timely manner. This project was no exception.

Each national report includes some discussion about how the methods were worked out in the national contexts. That will not going to be repeated here. Instead, evaluation at the Nordic level is presented. The Nordic project is based on self-evaluation, on the one hand by the research group and on the other hand by the leader of the Nordic research. Material for the research project evaluation consists of the memos of the project meetings over the years. Evaluations were carried out together at the beginning, the middle and the end of the project. Several methods were used in combination.

In the beginning the expectations and motivation were quite high both nationally and at the Nordic level. In the middle phase of the proceeding we asked and discussed three questions:

1. What do I think / how do I feel about my own national project?
2. What are my feelings and expectations concerning this Nordic research meeting?
3. What do I think / how do I feel about our common Nordic project?

Each participant picked a Bear card[7] to illustrate her/his feelings concerning each theme, and gave an explanation to her/his choice to the rest of us. Self-evaluation began with an individual base. After listening to each researcher and senior researcher concerning their thoughts and feelings, reflection about these took place. Feelings and experiences were in part somewhat similar among us, though some individual and different feelings were presented too.

Feelings about the national projects varied according to the current stage in each research. Those who have been able to start the empirical part - data collection and the first stages in analysis - were inspired, motivated and very anxious to get forward. Still, frustration was something in common because of the delays at the initial stage, due to a low season in the FGC-field and difficulties in getting families to participate in the research. It seems that the more interviews and observations that are done the more interest and commitment was aroused in the project. Those who had not been able to start the empirical part were frustrated and disappointed about that, but still very anxious to get started.

7 Bear cards come originally from Australia ®. They are cards that show various kind of emotions – mainly used when working with younger children, helping them to express their mood and feelings.

Feelings and expectations for the meeting at hand were very positive. The previous meeting had been experienced as very stimulating and important, and everybody was eager to continue the discussion and push forward with it. The group has developed as un-hierarchical and open, even free, leaving room for individuals. Challenging, questioning, wondering and supporting each other's views can happen freely and in quite a warm atmosphere. Debates have been experienced as necessary and fruitful research dialogues, and it was hoped that these kinds of dialogues would continue. There were also feelings of not being fully heard or understood, and feelings of being left alone in opposition.

Feelings about the Nordic project as a whole were more ambivalent. Lots of doubt, uncertainty and open questions were presented because of the many challenging factors in the common project. Before the common analysis was done and the compiled into a common report, the intention was to resolve the different and tight timetables of the national projects, as well as the challenges in connecting the national results together as a solid whole. Other things to also be resolved at that point were the translation into English of the national parts (to what extent, in which stage of the process), the distribution of work (in writing the common report) and other important issues. Nevertheless, even if the common report is an important part and result of the project, the Nordic project set out to achieve much more than that. The common Nordic planning was the starting point and the framework for the national studies, and each country's results as well as the common research dialogues can be freely used across the countries – in national articles, in field-connections, in (academic) seminars and so on.

The researchers were most worried (both nationally and at the Nordic level) about how to adequately argue and position this research – in terms of approaches, methods, results - to convince not only the field workers but also the academic audience of its validity. This worry had its connections to both Knut Sundell's follow-up study and to the robust debate and demand for evidence-based social research at that time.

As a leader of the research, my feelings and expectations to reach the goals varied. To get the research going took time - and there was nothing we could do to influence that. Everyone did what was possible to prepare a good start. When the first children were ready to be interviewed the atmosphere changed. The empirical phase was very busy. Analysing in parallel to gathering new data and collecting and arranging the data for the child's story kept everyone busy. Anyhow, it seemed to be very inspiring. The motivation clearly grew from the bottom of the wave. Expectations towards the Nordic meetings grew the more intensive became the analysis of the material.

The different pace at which things progressed in the different countries caused not only frustration but also difficulties in proceeding as planned. Discussions were important; they had to be given time and space. Very abstract discussions on themes needed to give way to practical questions relating to data collection. But

they didn't. Several different parallel discussions were in the air. I felt pressure from opposite directions: First, to decide on the things that must be done the same way in each country; second, to allow everybody enough room for national purposes and to take their own decisions about how to proceed. I have recognised the need for tighter leadership – and the need for research freedom among the group members. My choice has been not to tell the research team what to do but to seek such balance that allowed us to go further in the process.

All in all, I saw the diversity as richness and as a challenge. Though sometimes I felt despair in trying to understand if the words we used really had enough shared meaning for all of us in our "languages". Finally, I feel confident with the validity and reliability of the research. In a way, the final report is based on the social capital that was created together. It is now for the readers as always to make the final evaluation.

Results

The results presented in the reports are collected here. The national results and findings will not be reported separately country by country. The focus will rather be on analysing the similarities and differences, with the findings presented in themes, and discussed only briefly. In addition to presenting the expected outcomes, the supplementary findings that emerged in the Nordic setting will be made visible. When reporting of the results is based on the National reports, they are cited. When referring to the discussions and reflections in the Nordic research meetings the following country codes are used: D= Denmark; F= Finland; I = Iceland; N= Norway; S = Sweden.

The results are presented for the three research questions. The first research question about the changes from a child perspective highlights the methods used to produce the outcomes. The findings concerning how the research methods – which were developed over the course of the project – worked in practice are presented and assessed.

The second question on the child's experiences and understanding of FGC as a method is reported following the FGC process and phases. The major supplementary findings about what happens in the private phase from a child perspective are reported.

When reflecting on the various findings, the research group produced a research-based checklist for promoting the child perspective in the process. The third and the last research question on how is a child perspective realised in FGC in practice is answered by means of this checklist. The aim is to focus on the phases where the possibility to promote or lose the child perspective exists.

One of the aims for the Nordic research project was to create ways to establish dialogical settings and to carry out dialogues both between the Nordic researchers and between people in the practical research settings in each country. Findings concerning combined research and practice are reported both on the Nordic level and in local settings.

Changes – from a child's perspective

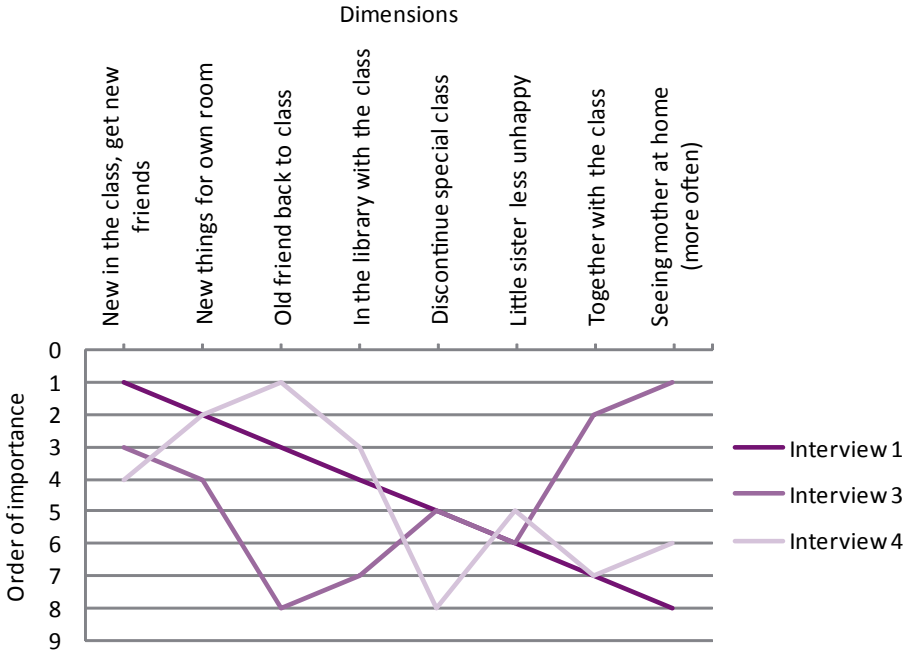
The first research question covering the situation and the changes from a child perspective before and after the FGC was keenly discussed in the research group throughout the whole process. We discussed primarily the concepts, the methods, our way of analysis and about the results in each national report.

A variety of views was present all the time. We navigated and balanced different views. In the beginning we had three basic alternatives concerning the child perspective. In the end we had two. The alternative of defining the child's perspective via determining risk factors and measuring changes was dropped. It was not sensitive enough for the unique situations and experiences. The two remaining alternatives were hard to reconcile. On the one hand there was the belief that a child perspective can be reached adequately by letting the children define the important issues for themselves and letting them produce their own stories concerning the process and the changes in FGC. On the other hand the suspicion remained that this was not enough to represent the child's perspective and that it may be too much guided by the adult and researcher's approach. These alternatives remain open, and the difference can be seen in the national reports.

The conclusion based on the Nordic reflections was that we used a set of methods that allowed good possibilities for the child perspective to be studied.

The researchers in the Nordic countries have visualised the results in different ways. In the chapter of methods a time-line presentation was given to describe the changes in each dimension in the Finnish data. Birgit Mortensen describes the dimensions named by the Danish children and their order of importance using tables and figures individually, child by child. Mortensen (2007, 127) presents the changes in priorities throughout the process in the form of a figure:

The order of importance of different dimensions as assessed by Mathias



Birgit Mortensen (2007) presented the results also in a table form. It shows the four dimensions most frequently mentioned by the children as areas where they hoped things would be well in the future. The following themes emerged explicitly: family, intimate friendships; things related to school, studies and work; and personal identity matters. As shown in the table, five in ten children regarded the parents as the most important dimension, followed by interpersonal relationships (four out of ten children) and personal matters (also four in ten children).

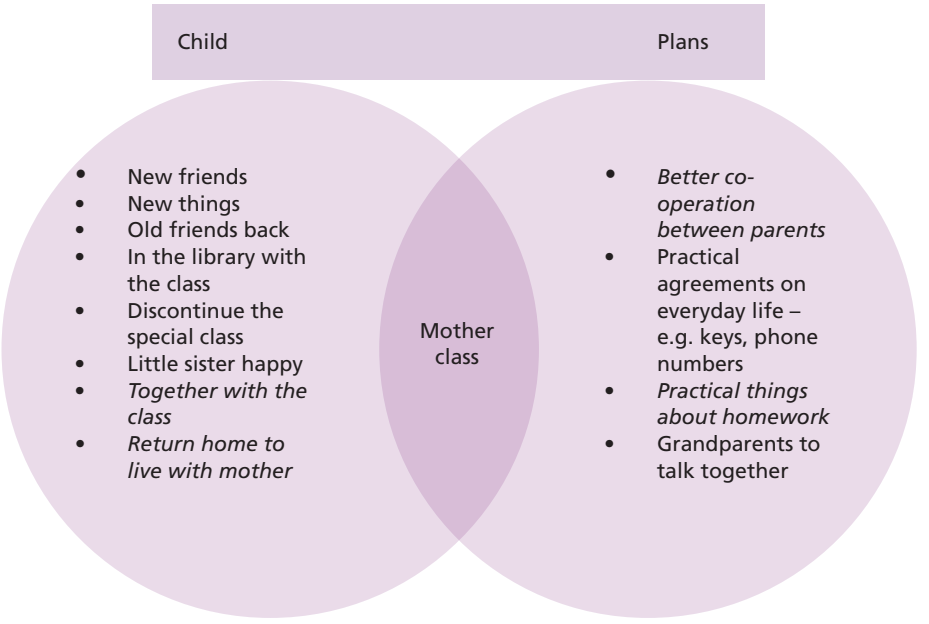
TABLE 7. Distribution of dimensions by priority rating Mortensen (2007, 112)

Priority rating / Theme	1	2	3	4	5
Mother and father	**5**	1	2	3	2
Family/intimates/friends	3	**4**	3	3	1
School/study/work	2	1	2	1	3
Child him/herself	0	**4**	2	2	3
Total (children)	10	10	9	9	9

The same thematic areas were identified in all countries. All children considered it important that the situation at home would normalise, in addition to which friends were important to all of them. The Norwegian researchers note that it was easy for the children to point out the dimensions for the future. Omre & Schjelderup (2008) connected the dimensions to the quality of life, both personally and in relationships, but also at a very concrete level, such as a room of one's own, furnishing the room, various material goods such as a mobile phone or a computer.

It could be concluded as a Nordic result, that the children pointed out similar issues which they wished to change in life: relations with and between the parents, situation at home and with friends and peers, connected to every day circumstances (school, work, free time) but also connected to the identity and self.

Comparisons were also made between children's and adults' points of view. Attention was paid to the question of whether the FGC process could bring up the children's and adolescents' worries and wishes and how the adults took these wishes and worries into consideration. The findings were presented using tables where the dimensions expressed by the children and those recorded in the plan were shown side by side, or by placing the texts within partly overlapping circles (below Mortensen 2007, 130).



It often happened that the dimensions the children considered the most important were seen by adults as being of minor importance, if not totally invisible to them.

The most important thing for the children seemed to be that the biggest worries had decreased. This seemed to influence other things and areas of life – including those not mentioned in the questions to be solved in the FGC.

It could be concluded that the children's opinions vary on how the FGC functioned as an initiator/launcher or the maintainer of the changes. Some children believed that the changes had happened independently of the FGC, others thought that the effects were specifically because of the FGC (Mortensen 2007; Reinikainen 2007; Omre & Schjelderup 2008).

Though the reports from the Nordic countries vary, some notions about FGC concerning changes were made and reported nationally. The central conclusion from the Finnish study was that the atmosphere in the meeting has some connection with whether changes happen. Reinikainen (2007) states that a child's or an adolescent's experience in the FGC-process – its significance both in the short run, as a working method, and in the long run, as an activator of changes – is strongly affected by how and to what extent the s/he feels the process to be dialogical or non-dialogical and what kind of atmosphere is created in the meetings. The experience of a dialogical proceeding and the experience of an atmosphere of caring are connected: the atmosphere of caring creates the foundations for a dialogical proceeding, and a dialogical approach strengthens the atmosphere of caring (ibid.).

In Denmark Birgit Mortensen (2007, 150) describes three groups of children based on how they see what causes the change: they relied on 1) the FGC meeting, 2) on themselves and 3) on a miracle. The first cause of change depends on how successfully the FGC is mobilised, the second on whether the children have appropriate resources for solving the problem and the third on whether a miracle can take place, that is, whether the children understand at all what has been agreed on in the FGC and what has been recorded in the plan.

The children have different positions regarding how they saw and understood the changes and how they saw their own role in making the changes. On the other end, there are those who were relied on and knew what they themselves can do in the situation to make it better. Those who saw their own role as central mobilised new resources and they had a better situation after one year. Unintended consequences were also pondered. Some women/girls tend to take too much responsibility and become burdened (Mortensen 2007; Reinikainen 2007).

Some young people in contrast gave a lot of credit to the FGC. They believed that without the FGC, positive changes might not have been possible, at least not to the same extent. They saw that the FGC-process had affected all participants and made everyone try her/his best to improve the situation, including her/himself. Those who rely on the FGC to be of help and had high expectations obtained value from the FGC: it mobilised the understanding among the private network about what the adolescents wanted and needed; it also created a binding frame for agreements.

Those waiting for a miracle lived in a situation where the plans did not proceed well; new resources were not mobilised; and where two parts existed (public and private), each waited for the other to take the first step (Mortensen 2007). For some children it was difficult to estimate the significance of FGC (FGC's role) in relation to changes in their lives. Some smaller children had no idea about how the changes happened. Primarily they saw that those changes had happened because the people concerned had changed their behaviour, and they did not see the FGC as having had any big role as an activator of the changes. They did not feel that the process had had any remarkable effect on their own behavior either.

Positive changes for the child were noticed in most of the cases (Åkerlund 2006; Mortensen 2007; Árnadóttir 2006) and in some cases it was considerably positive (Reinikainen 2007; Omre & Schjelderup 2008). In some cases, positive changes were not so evident but they could be seen; and in a few cases they were not visible (Åkerlund 2006; Reinikainen 2007; Árnadóttir 2006). Children with a kind of reluctant view did not know how to say if something had changed or not after the meeting. The usual way of putting it for the children was:

> "...no, nothing's different...everything the same, not exactly the same maybe... (Freysteinsdóttir & Árnadóttir 2007, 12)

There were cases where the plan was not carried out well. In addition, other changes may have happened (Reinikainen 2007; Mortensen 2007). These changes were reported concerning changes in human relations; changes inside the adolescent; changes in everyday life; changes in initiating or planning future interventions and actions by means of social agency; changes in the way the private network acts. (Åkerlund 2006.)

Children's worries had lessened in most of the cases. One can ask if the worries of social workers had lessened as much in each case. In the follow-up meetings, social workers and other professionals saw previously worrying situations as having calmed down, and they seemed to have a rather confident belief in a positive progress (summaries for follow-up meetings, observations). Some of them reported, though, that they had had only a minor contact with the family during the follow-up period, so to some extent the idea behind their views was "no news means good news" (Reinikainen 2007).

Sometimes when the children thought that the FGC had led to no major changes in their situation, the researcher might have a different interpretation of the situation. From the researcher's perspective, as each process was looked at through all the data available, the significance of the FGC showed up as central and somewhat more important than from the children's or young people's perspective (Reinikainen 2007; Omre & Schjelderup 2008).

In order to be fully grasp the opportunity offered by the FGC, the children and the parent should realise what this opportunity is like. Omre & Schjelderup (2008) underline that some children become active and learn to use their skills during the process. Further, some parents actively make use of the FGC by building up a larger network for the protection of the child. Some other parents, in turn, feel uncertain about what is expected from them and wait for the authorities to take the initiative. Omre & Schjelderup see that the power of authorities overshadows the relationship and makes it more difficult to make use of the opportunities offered by the FGC. In such situations, the co-ordinator has a particularly important role in communicating knowledge and opening and encouraging new possibilities.

Mortensen (2007, 148–150) presents her conclusions about the role of the FGC in producing the changes. The FGC supports change through three different factors: witnessing, understanding and integrating. Mortensen believes that it is easier to make the changes happen when there are witnesses to the process and the drawing up of the plan. In addition, it is important that these witnesses are people who form part of the networks of everyday life rather than professionals from within a social agency. Another important thing is that the process generates common understanding and that the necessary knowledge is available to everyone. The FGC brings together things that have been separate and thus creates and promotes integration. It is possible to link together different things and people who have been avoiding each other to make it possible to meet face to face.

Can these contributory factors identified by Birgit Mortensen be seen to spring from the notion of trust and the feeling of trust generated through encounters between people? Could we think that for a change to happen, trust in its many forms is needed between the different parties? First, trust is needed between the members of the private network. Second, trust is needed between different authorities and professionals. Third, trust is needed between the public and the private, between these networks.

One of the main themes to discuss further is the obvious differences between children's and authority's views on what are the things that need to be changed. The children defined important changes for them in life, and they did it differently than the authorities. They connected the changes in every day personal life and in relationships to the significant persons. In contrast, the authorities defined the worries and questions to be solved in institutional connections and made it often using institutional language (with exceptions of course).

The other important, wider theme is the atmosphere. Feeling a part of a real dialogue promotes the process. These kinds of elements were recognized also in other Nordic countries. It was concluded in the Finnish study that the experience of a dialogical proceeding and the experience of an atmosphere of caring are connected.

FGC as a method from a child perspective

The findings concerning FGC as a method from a child perspective are presented according to the phases in FGC. In the interviews children were asked about their experiences, going from the preparatory phase, to the meeting and the follow-up. In particular, the findings concerning the private phase will be here reported. Further, the roles of a support person and some general findings will be discussed. Based on the research reflections, the checklist for child-focused practice will be presented separately as a research result.

First some notes concerning the data. It should be remembered that the situations that have been analysed in examining children's participation are not concerned with everyday family conflicts but are more like serious crisis situations. In the background there are issues that concern both adults and children, and that in many cases have not previously been discussed and pondered over together. This is a new situation for everyone taking part in FGC as it differs from all traditional procedures. Even in the oral hearings arranged at the Administrative Court in cases where a child is taken into care, not all the problems are expressed aloud (Korpinen 2008). There are things that people find difficult to talk about (such as mental disorders) and these issues tend to be hushed up more easily than some other matters (such as misuse of alcohol).

The research data varied between the Nordic countries in e.g. what kinds of previous experiences of clienthood in social work and child protection children and families have had. The attitude that families take up when an FGC process is suggested to them seems to depend on the extent to which the family is dependent on public support (D; N; I). In Denmark, the families who gave consent for the research were often dependent on economic support. The situation where the social worker suggested FGC to the family might include contradictions; maybe the family feared that refusing the offer would lead to the loss of economic support. Depending on whether the family saw the FGC as a possibility or as a threat has an impact on what kind of FGC it became.

Children often spoke of their experiences concerning previous clienthood in the arena of social welfare. They were tired of the continuous meetings with professionals "I hate all these meetings!!" They had lost their trust – if there had ever been any. In the absence of high hopes, they may have had a curiosity to experience something different. Those children who have no previous difficult experiences of clienthood were more positive towards the FGC meeting. (I)

An FGC involving a adolescent is often concerned with a crisis. Basically the underlying idea is that the private network can be best mobilised in a crisis situation. However, the crisis may have been going on for a long time, with the adolescent having years' of experience of various negotiations and meetings in the school, social agency or psychiatry clinic. Accordingly, Åkerlund (2006) states that at the FGC preparation phase, when adolescents are to be motivated for and involved in planning the FGC, they are rather poorly motivated and have low expectations. As a result, they may first resist the change in different ways rather than adopt an open attitude to this new way of making future-oriented decisions (Nyberg 2006). Some of the children felt strongly that the adults usually do not listen to them. Therefore, they might not even try to get into the adult's conversations, they give up in advance (D; I; S; F).

Preparation phase

In Iceland, the FGC was a new idea and all the cases were the very first for the organisers. This is noticeable in the reported experiences – achieving sufficient preparation is not easy. Nevertheless, the children reported some positive experiences, such as the attention to their situation. However, some important key rules for the FGC were not followed: The children did not participate in forming the questions and making the plan. Furthermore, the children were not allowed to choose their support person; instead the parents made the choice for them. Professionals need to be prepared for the meetings. They were not talking to the children directly, they talked about the children, in front of them. That can be a humiliating experience for a child (Freysteinsdóttir & Árnadóttir 2007). Experiences gained from Iceland

clearly show what pitfalls and other issues to avoid, and which should be on the checklist for the preparation phase in order to ensure the implementation of the child perspective.

It was evident that it was not only in Iceland that the children were excluded. These findings could be read in every report. In Denmark, the questions for the FGC were formulated by the social worker, and discussed with the family during a home visit. The children did not usually take part in this; they thought it was more important that the questions were the "right questions" than for them to take part in formulating them (Mortensen 2007, 81–82). The Danish children reported that most of them had never seen or heard about the questions made for the FGC, but they had an idea what the questions would be about. They also gave good scores when assessing the relevancy of the questions (Mortensen 2007, 76).

Children's experiences of being involved were connected with age and sex/gender. This was taken up in every national report. These conclusions are more research based and, to some extent, the approved hypothesis. Unanimously it was noticed that children and young people usually had strong views and opinions concerning their own and the family's situation, but they were clearly aware of their subordinate position in a process guided and led by adults. The younger children's conception of the proceeding in the preparation phase as well as of the matters to be resolved in FGC was weak. Their experience of being part of the process in some cases was "nearly zero". Young people instead felt they had been part of the preparation phase to some extent or strongly, but they saw their position in the forthcoming FGC-meeting as a little insecure and dependent on the will of the adults. They hoped that in the FGC things would finally be discussed thoroughly and that their views would also have some weight. Nevertheless they saw that in the end, it was the adults who had authority over matters. (Reinikainen 2007).

As Reinikainen (2007) summarized it, young women experienced the preparation phase as a fairly dialogical process. They felt centrally involved when agreeing to have the FGC in the first place, when agreeing on the most central concerns to be discussed, and when deciding about which people and which professionals were to be invited. They were hopeful and optimistic when awaiting the forthcoming FGC and saw themselves as a main character in the meeting. The person with previous experiences in child protection proceedings did not wholeheartedly trust the possibilities to have an influence.

The young men, in contrast, did not exactly experience the preparation phase as dialogical. Others would have liked to be more involved, but felt as if the adults had kept things between themselves and left them outside of it. They might have participated in making decisions about certain things or in accepting suggestions made by adults, but did not have the feeling of being genuinely included in the process. Others opted out from preparations on their own account. Reinikainen (2007) thinks that maybe young men in contrast to young women do not seek discussions and look for the possibility for a dialogical relationship

with professionals (social workers) or co-ordinators, or rather, may even withdraw from those discussions, thus demonstrating their autonomy in the family and independence from child protection. Also it is possible that young men's way of talking and expressing their views makes it more difficult for female workers to create a dialogical relationship with them. (ibid.)

In the Finnish study the younger children were not involved in agreeing on the concerns or questions to be dealt with, but they were asked which people close to them they would like to invite and they also got to choose the meals and drinks for the meeting. They had not formed any clear conception of what the FGC was about and what was to come later, and they did not exactly see themselves as having any particular role in the process. In the interviews children nevertheless expressed strong views about different matters and spoke about the expectations they had for the FGC. The interview gave an impression that they would have been ready and willing for a dialogical relationship with adults during the process, but they were not invited into such a relationship (ibid.).

> "Do they really want to come to my FGC?" (ibid.)

There is a difference in how parents and children connect their feelings to the network participation. The Swedish report deals with this question: The parents may hesitate over the possibility of help from the private network, they say that they simply don't trust that the help can be found there. The adolescents' sensitive concern is: if I suggest whom to invite to my FGC, do these persons really want to come? The researcher thinks that young people seem to be afraid of rejection and therefore strive to avoid such situations. The consequence can then be that fewer people than necessary will be invited. The adolescent's fear lays a heavy burden on the co-ordinator who feels that it is only fair to the young person to make a good attempt, and gives them some story from their experience that contradicts this fear. It seems as if the question: "will anyone show up to my meeting?" is behind their worry. A question that faces the co-ordinator in turn is: how can I communicate this fear of the adolescent to all those invited so that they understand that their showing up is important in keeping the adolescent's trust? Various strategies are needed to communicate this question in a sensitive way to the adolescent, to family members and to professionals (Nyberg 2006; Åkerlund 2006).

Almost all children interviewed thought that all those people that they wanted to be there from the private network were invited to the FGC. (N; F)

The results show that young people feel nervous and tense during the period of planning for the FGC, and also in the very beginning of the meeting.

"I had butterflies in my stomach."

"I felt nervous when I came." (Reinikainen 2007; D, I, N)

Children may find the preparation phase too long. When important issues (such as ”where I’m going to live”) are unresolved and the future is uncertain, three months seems a long time to wait for the matter to be settled. On the other hand, the preparation phase offers an opportunity to establish contacts within the network and prepare for the FGC. Some have noticed that the preparation phase was a time to create alliances. (D)

Meeting

In the beginning of the meeting, some tension was often noticed, but very soon the atmosphere relaxed (D, F, I, N). Children were usually nervous before the first FGC. Primarily, if the tension was obvious between divorced parents, the children were worried about how the adults would react.

The information phase was implemented in different ways, ranging from a constructive, matter-of-fact provision of information to problem-centred situations that were perceived as oppressive. Often social workers began with a summary of the situation, expressing their concerns and posing their questions to the FGC. The information given by social workers varied from clear and well grounded, to a vague presentation where the private network were left unsure about the situation. Mortensen (2007, 88) noticed: if the client was totally opposed to the social worker’s ”lies”, an atmosphere of mistrust was created.

The FGC also often involved a representative of the school. The accounts given by teachers ranged from encouraging views to descriptions of problem behaviour (D, F. I. N). Correspondingly, the style and language of all reports varied with the profession. Patterns of expression varied from a commonplace subjectivising language to a diagnostic objectivising language. Omre & Schjelderup (2008) underline that the nature of the initial information provision affects the atmosphere in which the private network start their own private meeting. They believe that the summaries should be presented in an inspiring, encouraging way.

Further, it was found that the members of the private network made use of the experts in different ways. While some were merely listening to them, others made questions; some even questioned the expert knowledge. Private networks have different levels of knowledge and different social networks, and vary also in terms of their position and degree of dependence in relation to the authorities (Omre & Schjelderup 2008).

From an adult perspective, the majority of summaries and questions had been written mainly in everyday language that referred to concrete matters and events. However, some concepts and expressions that are part of established professional use were strange for children. Some concepts were so abstract that it was difficult to see the point in relation to the child’s owns situation. There were also times when

even the adults from the private network did not quite understand the nature of the concern.

Some differences were noticed in how the various professionals positioned themselves in relation to the children. The co-ordinator often focused their speech and eyes directly on the child in the meeting. The other professionals more often talked about the child in the third person (I; F). In the information phase, the discussions were mostly directed from adults to children, along with a kind of value judgement – and this was taken differently by children (S).

The researchers highlighted how the professionals present the child in their summaries. Some of the summaries reflected a picture that was burdened by worries and difficulties and gave a depressing image of the child. It seemed that the influence of negative characterizations about the child's emotions and self-concept had not been taken into account. These kinds of summaries do not show any trust or seek for strengths. This seems to miss the possibility of creating fruitful grounds for empowerment and building on resources. (F; N; D; I; S)

Some younger children were *bypassed,* even when they sometimes tried to be noticed by being loud. For example, when reading the Finnish transcript material I found an obvious process: a boy in the beginning (in the first phase of his FGC) sat still and was looking forward to the meeting. As soon as the first professional began to describe the problems with the child, the child's reaction became visible. The more he heard the not-so-nice assessments about himself the more he began to make noise, tramping his feet, moving around. That was not seen in the meeting as a statement but only as a nuisance. (F) The child may participate in the process by acting out. In these situations some of them were sent out.

Anyhow, it was easier for the adolescents than for the younger children to understand the discussions, to participate verbally and to have room for a dialogue. Even so, the adolescent might have talked a lot without having the feeling of being part of a dialogue (F). Even in dialogues there are moments of monologues.

The common and the main impression was that the information given by professionals does not include the child's perspective in the sense that the child's own views or statements are not cited or set forth. It is not based on discussions with the child but rather information obtained by the professionals and discussions between colleagues on the child's situation and the family's inadequacy (inadequate care in the child's home situation). The inadequacy of the school's resources o, for example, is never mentioned (Omre & Schjelderup 2008).

Professionals' summaries varied in how children's own views were visible. It may be said that the adolescent's views, worries and wishes were well reflected in the summaries, whereas those of the younger children were reflected very little, if at all (Reinikainen 2007).

Reinikainen (2007) concludes that children differed by age and gender in how actively, courageously and spontaneously they brought forth their views, worries and wishes in meetings. Also their own experience concerning their participation

in discussions and in making a plan varied from total non-participation to determined, active participation.

According to Reinikainen's observations, the young women were very active and determined in bringing forth and defending their views. They participated centrally in the discussion and in making the plan, not less than any adult participant in the meeting. They felt responsible and capable of assessing what was essential to their well-being in the situation. They also brought forth their views strongly with credible argumentation. The young men, in contrast, were clearly more quiet but participated at times, especially when something was asked of them. To some extent they participated also spontaneously in the discussion. In the interviews they indicated considering themselves as responsible and capable of assessing their own situation as well as the young women did, but in the meetings they did not bring their views forward as actively and determinedly. Does the private meeting easily proceed under the same terms as the preparation phase, so that young men, with their ways of verbal expression, perhaps a slower and more "searching" way of speaking, tend to get pushed aside in discussions? The younger children participated in the meetings only a little if at all. They themselves did not actively try to participate in discussions, and neither were they particularly persuaded to it by adults (Reinikainen 2007).

In Iceland the children in most of the cases did not think of themselves as participants in making the plans. They tended to think that the adults had made the plans. In the phase of discussion and accepting the plan, the younger children started to be irritated and did not seem to know what the others were talking about any longer. They participated very little in the conversation at that point, and they were not asked to do so either. The family's proposals were all accepted with minimal changes (Freysteinsdóttir & Árnadóttir 2007).

Private phase

The private meeting time as a separate phase in FGC is highly valued for its privacy. It is considered as something where it is totally rude and forbidden for outsiders to penetrate. It is not meant that the professionals or the authority, or even the researchers participate in it. It is the core and source for empowering the family community. It offers room for realising the right to participate and for producing the family voice. It is almost a "sacred" happening – and it is just for the family.

For us it also meant something else: not just for the family and not just for producing the family voice. Our focus was the child's voice – and the question was what happens to the child's voice in the private phase. How tacit or explicit was it, and how was it heard or interpreted?

Prior to this study, hardly any research had been done where researchers participated as observers in the private phase of FGC. Some project leaders may

have participated ”as a fly on the wall”, out of curiosity (as did Jytte Faureholm, a member in our previous Nordic group during 2000–2003). The Victorian Department of Human Services in Australia (1999) carried out an evaluation study where the private phase of FGC was observed in 22 out of 28 cases. The qualitative data was quantified. The researchers rated various structured questions from 1 to 7, such as ”is there one member who dominates the private meeting” or ”how well does the family stay with the purpose of the meeting?” Huntsman (2006) notices in her literature review a number of FGC issues which she interpreted remaining uncertain. She hesitates about the corner stone itself, and asks whether the private phase is supported. Based on research, it seemed that some family members liked it, others wanted professionals or convenors to be there or invited them to stay, and others felt it made no difference.

We were unanimous about the value of the unique setting and research material we gained in the Nordic study via the researchers being present in the private phase. These findings are reflected in more detail below.

The fact that an authority does not attend and cannot regulate the private phase has led to some of those left outside to develop prejudices and suspicion towards the method. The main concern from the researchers' point of view was: how is the child heard in the private phase, what is the position of the child, and what kind of participation is possible for the child. Are the families too 'dysfunctional' to make sound decisions? Is there one or more who dominate and manipulate the meetings? How is the family power structure realised there, would the weak voices became excluded and silenced? Someone has even asked ”are we throwing the child back to the wolves?” In the Nordic project, we wanted to see how the private network meetings went.

The findings from the private phase (”black box”) are mainly based on interviews with children and on observations which the researchers made during the private meeting. The *criteria for observations* were discussed by the researchers, and the practices seemed to be reasonably similar – though there were variations in expressions in the reports and additional points of interest. The researchers in each country had been present in almost all of the first FGC-meetings, sometimes in the follow-up meetings, and very often through all the phases. Observations were shared and discussed in several research meetings and dialogues through the years. This might have been reflected also in the way each researcher reported her findings nationally.

I collected findings concerning the ”black box” from the national reports, and from the dialogues in the final Nordic research meeting in May 2007, where the findings, some already reported, some yet in process, were discussed and reflected upon.[8] The final discussion concentrated on ethics, findings and surprises for

8 When referring to the discussions and reflections in the final and proceeding research meetings, a letter symbol for the country is used instead naming the person, D denoting Denmark, F Finland, I Iceland, N Norway and S Sweden.

In the last research meeting the discussion was facilitated by research professor Tom Arnkil from STAKES, Finland.

the researchers as observers in the black box. A memorandum produced by the research leader was sent after the research meeting to all the researchers to check and comment on. A draft of the chapter was later circulated to the same group by e-mail. I noticed that different themes were emphasised in the research discussions than were explicitly in the written reports.

The following three central themes were seen in the material concerning the Black box: 1) how the private network worked, 2) how the atmosphere can be described, 3) what was the position and participation of the child. In reporting, the aim was to keep the child's perspective visible.

Orientation and the way of proceeding in the private meeting

It had obviously been a strange situation for the family to begin the private meeting following the sharing of professional information. What they had heard may have aroused contradictory emotions. It was something new they came up against, for many perhaps the first time in their lives. Uncertainty would stretch the feelings in that situation. Some describe it as clumsy, painful, odd (Mortensen 2007, 89), expectant, difficult, dubious (Omre & Schjelderup 2008, 98; Åkerlund 2006, 46; Freysteinsdóttir & Árnadóttir 2007, 8); there was no routine but a moment to seek out the way to begin. As a boy from Denmark put it (Mortensen 2007, 90):

> At first I think it was a bit awkward. As we had to sit down, and then we got that food so it was a bit more fun but then we were sitting there… who should start, what should one say and everybody is just sitting and looking at each other – and what is this… (Maj, 2nd interview)

Every family, every private network does however, begin the meeting and does go on in its own way. This may form a kind of a team-building process in practice. The attitude was expressed for example that "we are not the professionals in these matters, but we solve this our own way" (Åkerlund 2006, 46).

Breaking the ice happened in many ways. Some needed humour and jokes. Sometimes even children took the initiative.

Some started with the questions on the agenda (Mortensen 2007, 89, Åkerlund 2006, 46). In Norway various models were identified for how the private meeting started its work:

1) problem-solving orientation – straight to the point, problem-solving right from the beginning
2) partnership orientation – start with making clear that in the end there will be an agreement between the child and the family
3) starting with a common knowledge basis – we all know the history, there is no need to repeat it, but, underlining that it is necessary for the network members

to get a hint or to get to know about the need for help, to be able to then offer help

4) adults' responsibility – confessing that they had done wrong in the situation.
5) declaration of love – expressing feelings in the beginning, how loved and important the child is for the community (Omre & Schjelderup 2008).

In Sweden it was noticed that in the beginning, the adults stressed the responsibility of the adolescent herself to try to find a way out of the situation (Åkerlund 2006, 46).

Among the three Icelandic cases there were two kinds of meetings reported: 1) *discussion oriented* where the problems of the family were discussed a lot and the child participated a lot and gave ideas for solutions 2) *problem oriented* where the discussions were focused on the problems of the child with a blaming tone, accusing the child and asking what she is going to do about the problem (Freysteinsdóttir & Árnadóttir 2007, 8–9; also recognised in Finland, Reinikainen 2007).

Of course the discussions had different directions, concerning feelings and ideas that bypassed the original questions made by social workers. Anyhow, the members in the private network returned to the original questions at the end (Åkerlund 2006, 46). There were also other kinds of barriers concerning the questions. The language used was not familiar to the people, and it was not always easy to answer the questions: For example, the concepts used by professionals might irritate (Reinikainen 2007, 74):

> In drawing up the plan the next question to be discussed was the access arrangements for the father and the child. (*How to guarantee the child's right to see the parent who lives elsewhere?*). The father pointed out strongly that in future he wants to be more involved in the child's life, whereas he didn't understand the wording of the question. *I don't quite understand that guarantee. I suppose it's possible to use common sense.* One of the family members was pondering aloud what guarantee usually means, but the father couldn't see the connection with the question under discussion. *Well how is it then done in this case?* Another family member explained that the child needs to see the parent on a regular basis, that it is necessary to agree on the times when they see each other. The father agreed but still didn't understand what this has to do with guaranteeing. *Well how can you guarantee that? --- Guarantee, guarantee* (irritated) … *I'm no guarantor here.*

Trying to understand what the questions were about, the member of a private network put it: "We had to think more – this doesn't make sense." (D) The child participated in this in his way: "A boy went out and in – the big brother saw that he was trying to say something by walking in and out." (D)

Another challenge was to keep the orientation in the future. It did not always turn out successful, as a boy from Denmark put it (Mortensen 2007, 90):

> "… and so it was, that everybody started to go back to all these old things again, and I think it was really at the start of the meeting that it was really bad and they started to dig up some things, some dishonesty and such. At that time I didn't really think about it but when I came home and thought about it, well, it was, like, many of them had misunderstood the point of the family group conference. (Janni, 2nd interview)

The constructive orientation was common: to orientate to the child and her/his future, "it's the child that matters", "We are here for the child" (N). Some tried very hard to look forward and forget the past (D). In some cases the contradictions between divorced parents were serious and obvious - that was seen in how people were seated, did they have any eye contact, how did they react to what each other were saying. There were also a few "horror-cases", where the family members did not forget the past at all (Mortensen 2007, 63–67; 90).

Every private network took their tasks *seriously*, even if they became a little bit uncertain when the professionals left the arena (S).[9] The process of producing the plans was usually *intensive* and serious, *under constructive leadership*. That was something which surprised the researchers (all of them). The atmosphere was then interpreted as honest - the participants did not try to put difficult things aside, even if they were dealing with problems which the researcher thought to be profoundly emotional and sensitive (N).

Sometimes researchers may have distrusted the resources of the family to cope with making the plan. In the research dialogue, first one researcher confessed to the group how surprised she was about how little trust she had beforehand - and the others also reflected on their similar findings:

> "Families were so strong, all of them, in different ways. I thought it would take one hour, but it took 4-5 hours. I was surprised how they really tried to solve the thing, tried to find solutions." - "They were just like us!" - "The private phase is a network meeting, and it is well organised. It has the capacity to bring the plan for the professionals. Imagine, family members without any professional education can handle the question anyhow. Social workers underestimate normal people. I am impressed." (I; F; N)

In the private meetings one could also witness how creative solutions were found. Sometimes the solutions can also be "easy" and concrete. To get rid of continuous demands or persuasion from friends by phone, "just throw the SIM card away!" an adolescent suggested. (N)

9 It was noted in the Dutch study – based on the children's stories – that hard work is done during the private time (van Beek 2008, 166).

The researchers noticed that during the private meeting *something was happening* between some members. There were moments, sensitive moments that both researchers and network members recognised, and the network members knew what it was about. Though the researchers were not aware what it was about, they could sense that it was important for the family. (N)

The significance of the private network *as a mediator* was visible in most meetings. For whatever reason, the persons could clarify and create tranquillity in the private discussion while seeking solutions (Reinikainen 2007, 102). Resources for the solution were found. The children were satisfied and sometimes even surprised with the activity the people showed. The most positive surprise for the children was when discussions led to a better common understanding, despite differences in opinions.

Thus, it is obvious that the private meeting includes other important functions besides merely planning and decision-making.

Atmosphere in the private phase

The atmosphere in the private meetings *varied.* In general the atmosphere was sensed to be good (D, F, I, N, S). Children seemed to be happy. Usually they had been looking forward to the meeting. It was obvious that when the atmosphere was caring, *children enjoyed* the discussions and feeling closely knit with the larger family. (F)

Reconciliation, forgiveness, and *understanding* were expressed and observed in the private phase. In Norway this has been one of the most clear findings, sequences of reconciliation have been observed in each FGC (Omre & Schjelderup 2008). The families have had various sources of stress and problems, several bitter experiences through the years. The researchers noticed that these same principles – child in the centre; looking towards the future and not back; everyone having a forum to speak and reach a common plan – were seen in practice as the driving force, releasing the energy to enable concentration on a resolution. (Omre & Schjelderup 2008).

Omre & Schjelderup (2008) describe this as follows: "What we see is that the family network members use the opportunity to bring up or resolve conflicts between individuals. We see that they make use of this opportunity when interaction leads to a theme that provides one with an opportunity to forgive or apologise to a family member.

One illustrative example is a grandfather of the child who clearly takes the initiative and talks directly to the child's father:

> *"I want to apologise to you for those incidents during the last few years when I've not shown you enough respect and trust…… I've been thinking of that a lot recently. I hope we can have a better contact than what we've had.*

> …… *I hope we can get a better relationship between us. I'd like to have more of these discussions between father and son.*"

This is an extract from a session during which there were long periods of complete silence in the room. An important element here was that the child, who in this family was 8 years of age, was present and listened to the reconciliatory discussion between the grandfather and father, which is important for how the family will come to terms in the future.

The above described processes has been noticed in other international research also. David Moore (1992) revealed in his study that the family group conferences had a powerful emotional effect on all of those present. He also connected so-called affect system theory to the theory of reintegrative shaming (originally John Braithwaite 1989), and he thinks this explains why the *role of shame* in the FGC is positive and constructive rather that oppressive.

Some social workers and other professionals have raised concerns about possible violence and potentially harmful acts occurring during the private time (Schjelderup & Omre 2002; Reinikainen 2007, 102). After all, nobody knows beforehand what is going to happen there! One can only anticipate. The researchers in the Nordic project found out that they had to face and reflect on their own prejudices.

> "I learned a lot in the black box - about social work and about myself. I have thought about it a lot afterwards. What a narrow perspective we have in social work!" (I - RM; all)

If the private meeting was not very constructive just at that time, we never know what constructive processes were *initiated* there. It takes time to see the full result. During the follow-up time, there were examples of "cleansing" episodes, where terrible shame and guilty was felt and encountered. Afterwards the child was pleased about the events. (In a Finnish case the children have previously witnessed an obscene "rock bottom" episode and something unpleasant for the mother to remember. The incident had remained unspoken of for a long time, until at the and of the FGC meeting, the child spoke about it in front of the whole audience. The mother became furious, but was forced to face what she had done. Later the children told in the follow-up interview that they felt better and that the relationship grew better after letting the cat out of the bag.

Stormy discussions and several colourful expressions were witnessed. A father's friend described the inability of the parents to communicate with each other; "the father can listen to only one thing at a time, and the mother is like a motor trap." He said it with humour in his voice, and both parents laughed at the expression. In general, variations in taking part in discussions between male and female were also noticed, both concerning adults and children.

The relationship between divorced parents was sometimes hostile, more often inflamed. Usually everyone, including the child, was conscious of tension between some members, but in the meeting it was not spoken of. The observer sensed the conflict. For example, the parties did not look each other but they could use indirect referrals and criticisms towards each other. The atmosphere could become stiff (Reinikainen 2007, 104). In such a meeting one of the parties stayed behind other members, the child tried to make it better. He became worried and intervened by asking: "why don't you come here as well and sit near the others?" (This intervention did not lead to a change; F.)

The private networks ability *to balance* the conflicts surprised some researchers. A divorced couple who had had furious fights were present in the meeting, and was able to attend the meeting without this becoming a big issue, without any drama, or any fighting (D).

Most often the manner of talking about the children's issues in the private phase was serious and concrete. The participants did not rush, they took all the time that was needed to make the plan (Reinikainen 2007, 100).

The central finding in the Finnish study seemed to be that *an atmosphere of caring is connected with success in FGC*. One could observe acts of caring, but also the general atmosphere was clearly sensed in the private phase, according to the researchers (Reinikainen 2007, 119; Omre & Schjelderup 2008). The Danish researcher saw a difference here. She argued for understanding and integration as key figures for success – and both of these can of course show as an atmosphere of caring (D).

Sometimes it was the child him/herself who made sure that the atmosphere did not stay miserable. In one instance, there had been disagreements in the attitudes towards an adolescent's behaviour, and the other party had given up by going quiet. Finally, the adolescent asked:

> "Why are you so silent? Were you hurt?" and got an answer: "A bit. Feeling empty. Let's go on." The adolescent did not give up: "I don't want to go on if she is hurt!" (Reinikainen 2007, 105)

Sometimes when the meeting was near the end the feeling became lighter and everyone looked relaxed. There was more room for jokes then. Also new beginnings were witnessed in some of the FGCs. For example families decided to rebuild traditions and restorative practices: "let's start with traditions again among the family, let's have Christmas together." (N; also F)

Child's position and participation in the private phase

The children's level of participation varied in each country. During this phase, the youngest children (up to 10 years) walked in and out of the meeting. Omre & Schjelderup (2008) report that it is difficult to see any pattern in this leaving and returning. Sometimes the children were asked by the adults to go out. Then they were brought back again in order to answer a few questions or clarify what they mean. Children also walked in and out of their own accord. They sat down, listened for a while and chose to go out again. Only in a few individual cases were they asked to remain seated. They were asked to remain seated or possibly brought back when issues linked with school and leisure time were discussed. In such issues the adults wanted to hear the child's own views (N, D, F).

The children were *present* during the private phase - although some of the youngest children did go in and out. At the same time they had their base in the meeting, following the discussions and relating to members of the family. There was only one exception, one private meeting where the children did not take part for the whole session. The Norwegian researchers asked, what do we mean by being present. The children decided to pop out for a while whenever they liked, and afterwards, when asked, they felt like they had been present in the meeting (Omre & Schjelderup 2008; D).

Many of the children felt the FGC was a meeting arranged just for them. Some of the children were very keen on it. They followed very accurately the facial expressions of their relatives and they observed how the adults acted. They also noticed tension behind the calm behaviour of the adults (Reinikainen 2007, 104).

In general, *adolescents had a stronger position and say in the meeting than the smaller children*. For the most part, the adults gave room to the children to participate. There were also adolescents and children who seized *their role as an active participant* and did not wait for the adults to give them permission to participate.

In some meetings, the problems of the family were discussed a lot, and the younger children participated a lot in the discussions and came up with some ideas for solutions. In other meetings, the discussion was more directed to the problems related to the children; what they were going to do to change their problems. In those situations the children did not have many answers, they just said something. (I)

Omre & Schjelderup (2008) describe their impression: The family members are uncertain about what the other family members think about the situation. They obviously lack models for what would be the proper thing to do. This can be seen when they exchange glances and when they ask what the others think about something. No one took the initiative and asked the child directly for example "Now we shall talk about where you will stay if mother falls ill. Would you like to discuss this with us?" (N)

It was characteristic of these relationships that people talked respectfully to one another (N). On the other hand, it was observed that while questions were directed to the children, the persons who asked the questions did not necessarily wait for answers. In many cases some grown-ups had already answered the questions before the persons who asked the questions had finished talking. (I)

Åkerlund (2006) observes how adults try to get the children to participate by asking them directly. Some try to show appreciation to the children, even trying to get them to take more responsibility for the social matters, to ”become an adult”. Often mothers give support and tried to get the children to speak for themselves. The adolescent gets more room and the positions and alliances are taken and formed. People take roles that often become quite stable, but sometimes roles also change during the private phase. The private network seemed to commit to FGC, and it then tried to get the adolescent to rethink the matter and try to see it from a new angle. The stronger the mobilisation in the private network, the more the positions changed during the meeting.

> ”The pot calls the kettle black”
> ”We are not professionals in these matters, but we have our own way to solve this.”

Even if there are different dialogues in the private phase compared to the information phase, the adult took over either by having monologues directed to the adolescent or having dialogues between adults; not that many dialogues between the children and adults were observed (Åkerlund 2006).

Children were more visible in the private phase (S - 47; also in F), and in phases 1 and 3 there were more monologues and dialogues between adults. The adolescents were most visible in the private meetings, though, their activity is not to be exaggerated (Åkerlund 2007, 47).

The real participation of the children seemed to be fleeting in nature, a point particularly highlighted in the Swedish report. Though the adults welcomed the adolescents involvement, they were actually more accommodating to each other. In the beginning of the meetings people positioned themselves and alliances were seen. The adults emphasized responsibility by saying to the young people ”think twice, try to see other perspectives!” Observations in the Swedish report conclude: The stronger the mobilisation in the private network, the more changes in the positions during FGC (Åkerlund 2006, 47). Paradoxically, if there was a lot of interaction between the adolescents and parents, it was towards opposite directions. This did not necessarily mean an opposing status or attitude. On the contrary, it is rather a consequence of the endless play between the adolescent and the parents. Adolescents can also take relatively few initiatives of their own but they give a good response to the adults nevertheless. (Åkerlund 2006 46–47).

In most of the meetings the focus was kept on *the child*. There were cases in Denmark where the mothers were mentally and physically ill, and then much emphasis was most obviously put on giving care to the children (D).

There were moments when the focus was about to shift to other questions, but perhaps surprisingly, it was not only once but quite often that *the child or adolescent her/himself intervened* and sometimes took the responsibility to guide the discussion back to the point. In one case, the adolescent seemed to be in thought, day dreaming with his head on his sister's lap. In the middle of intensive quarrelling he lifted his head and got irritated "we'll get forward if you two, both of you, admit that in some things you both are wrong". This stopped the quarrel (Reinikainen 2007, 105).

Previous research has noticed how easy it is to shift the focus from the child to the adult - and vice versa; how difficult it is to keep focused on the child's perspective. In one case, the private network with the adolescent was opposing the mother's behaviour. The mother felt very strongly that she was being made to feel guilty. She kept explaining her actions and usually saw the reason as outside herself. The others thought the whole discussion had been about the adolescent, not about the mother. Opposing points of views remained even though other things happened in that case (Reinikainen 2007, 105).

The adolescents also experienced *feelings of being made a scapegoat*. "It was an uphill meeting. They hammered me and everything was my fault" (Åkerlund 2006, 48). The same person continued later: "I think I can say what I like, that's my opinion, but there might be other opinions, and it's then they become sour. Anyhow, I'd like to say what I think. That's what I have always done, but I didn't want to, then I just sit and listened too." In the beginning of this meeting the private network eagerly showed how she must take care of things, but later on, the mother also had her share of advice. The network members started more and more to consider the daughter and the mother as equal, actually "as good cabbage suckers both of them". The network helped to lessen the distance between them. Both might have feelings of being made the scapegoat, but in the longer run, they also had other feelings.

Several positive elements were noticed concerning the participation of the children. The Norwegian report (Omre & Schjelderup 2008) lists the following: the private network has heard the child, the child has heard a lot of confession, received acknowledgement and understanding, they have been cared for, they have been treated as subjects while also being objects of the discussion at the same time, they have established new bonds and also new ways to contextualise feelings of guilt, theirs and others.

All children and young people felt the inclusion of the people of the private network as welcome and a good thing. In principal, the children were content with their contributions in the meetings. However, sometimes they considered the way some of those people treated them as annoying or frustrating. In principal the *young people* felt that the private network people listened to them, were interested

in their views and took those views seriously. In some matters, though, they felt ignored by the whole adult team, so that no-one understood their views or took their suggestions seriously. Talking about their own situation and the family situation with those close to them was not difficult in the opinion of the young people, but at times it was intense. Some young people felt that talking in the follow-up meeting was somewhat easier than it was in the first FGC (Reinikainen 2007).

Ways of excluding the child were also observed. At times they were not listened to: the children were not heard though even they tried to say something. If a question was directed to the children, the person asking did not necessarily wait for the child to reply (Freysteinsdóttir & Árnadóttir 2007, 8–9). Some of the child's reactions were excluded, such as denying an opposing opinion of the child, who responds by increasing the volume of noise as they hear nasty things being said about them. Sometimes the tension was too much, and the child went out saying "I knew what was coming and didn't like to be there then". This was another example of anticipations based on tacit knowledge about knowing from within relationships (See Shotter 1993).

Follow-up

A follow-up meeting was not organised in all cases. Also the FGC practice varied between the Nordic countries in this respect (Heino & Reinikainen & Bergman 2002). In Denmark, only four in ten cases had had a follow-up meeting. The researchers found that the follow-up meetings were shorter than the first FGC meetings. The follow-up meetings were also described as more efficient (Freysteinsdóttir & Árnadóttir 2007). Further, positive things were taken up more frequently in follow-up meetings than in the first FGC meetings. When appraising the implementation of the plans, it was also possible to focus on what had worked well.

Especially Danish young people were reported (Mortensen 2007, 98) to have felt confident about the plans. Now they had "witnesses" to the plan concerning not only themselves but also their parents. Many of them went home relieved, looking forward to following up the plan.

Life is also where unexpected things happen. Everything cannot be planned and all plans cannot be fulfilled; things are not totally in control. A nexus member of the private network may fall sick or even die and this had a role in the plan becoming disorganised at least for a while (as in one of the cases) .

Some children were very satisfied with the plan created at the FGC meeting. They just accepted it as it was: this is what the family needed to do. Some children had not seen the plan since the meeting, and that the family had not discussed it since either. In the Finnish study Reinikainen (2007) showed that the young people were quite happy about the plans made in the FGCs. They felt they had participated inconsistently in making the plan, but rather a lot than a little. Profound discussions

and hearing different points of views presented by people close to them in the private meeting had helped them to approve even those decisions they had opposed in the beginning. In some meetings it seemed it was easier for an adolescent to listen to other people close to them than to their parents. When the person who took a stand concerning a matter was someone the adolescent appreciated, outside the immediate family, they could let go something they had wanted before and give a chance to other possible solutions. For younger children, the plan made in the FGC did not have much significance, however. They hadn't taken part in making the plan, so in their opinion the agreements written down in the plan as well as the following of the plan were not important. One of them did not even know why the plan had been made. (F)

Children participated more actively in the follow-up meeting than in the first FGC meeting. They were more visible and involved. They felt sure about themselves, and their competencies received more room than in the previous meeting (Åkerlund 2006). This can be seen as an indication of empowerment and also as a sign of the launching and strengthening of the process during the FGC. Mortensen (2007, 102) found that children assumed responsibility, took the initiative and showed good will. They perceived that they were playing an important role and felt that they took part in making a change happen in their situation.

The observations have shown that the families feel more secure when they are familiar with the form of the model. They felt more comfortable during the follow-up FGC. It takes time during the first meeting to realise that the FGC is something different from the traditional meetings with professionals that the clients may have been used to (Nyberg 2006; Åkerlund 2006).

It might have become apparent during the follow-up phase that some parents showed an ambivalent attitude towards the possibility of getting help from their private network. The contacts between relatives were not all that frequent in many of the families. The first meeting showed that it is possible to get help (Nyberg 2006; Åkerlund 2006). Especially in Sweden, the number of participants from the private network often diminished during the process, and in the end there were very few participants left. There are several case-based explanations for that.

There were some processes which ended after the first FGC; no follow-up meetings were arranged. In these cases, children usually preferred to have a meeting where the events could have been discussed. Some families moved from the municipality during the process, and for these children some continuity was requested (Mortensen 2007). Sometimes the jointly agreed follow-up meeting was cancelled. Often this was a disappointment to the children. They felt that the adults did not take the matter seriously (Omre & Schjelderup 2008). Sometimes a network meeting was considered to be relevant instead of an FGC follow-up meeting (F; D).

The follow-up time can show that the authority has not done what was agreed and planned. Those cases activated two kinds of reactions among the researchers:

anger on behalf of the clients and understanding towards the social workers. Omre & Schjelderup (2008) describe a case where a sudden turn had taken place in a family's situation during the follow-up phase, and the social authorities reacted by deciding on emergency measures – the FGC process and the private network were set aside. The FGC as a model of decision-making was disregarded, and the social authorities restored the traditional way of doing things. The family felt violated and devalued. From previous research (D, F, N. S) we can state that this is not a unique case.

The reaction of understanding leans on the shared experience on how burdened and short of time social workers nowadays are (D, F, I, N, S). The child waiting for something subjectively important to happen experiences the time differently than the professional responsible for too many things at work. It may take a very long time for the social service to fulfil the tasks they agreed to in the plan after an FGC. The Swedish researchers ask what strategies can motivate the social worker to give priority to the commitments of the plan, as obligations that need fast action - and see the obligations as a question of trust between the family and the social services (Nyberg 2007; Åkerlund 2006).

According to Omre & Schjelderup (2008), all children who had been interviewed perceived that they could have participated in the FGC process even more extensively. They believed that they had understood the idea of the FGC and were well aware of what had happened during the process. At the end of the follow-up time, most children believed that the FGC method was good for the family.

Findings concerning the role of a support person

Most children involved in the Nordic research had a support person during the process. A difference was noticeable if there was not a person accompanying the child, helping her to understand and to express herself. "It is important to have somebody to stand up for me" (Omre & Schjelderup 2008; D, F).

The support person's role seemed to be very important (Mortensen 2007, 92 - 93; Reinikainen 2007, 108–111; N). The competencies require a maintaining of balance in relation to the child, in relation to the chair person, and diplomatic balancing in general (Mortensen 2007, 93).

Support persons took various roles in the private phase. Some were passive, some active, some were highly appreciated within the network, having contacts with everyone, some were less known by others. If the support person was able to act as a nexus, (s)he could act like a chair, guiding the private meeting (Åkerlund 2006, 48). The choice of a friend as a support person for adolescents did not seem a good solution. It was not easy for those in the personal network to rely upon the promises made by the adolescent and the friend (to stop drug abuse; D). If the support person was for example the mother's friend and did not have an

existing relationship with the child, they could participate actively from the child's perspective and as a family friend, though not, in fact, helping the child in question to express her/himself (Reinikainen 2007, 109).

For some children the support person was a genuine support, both in a concrete and symbolic sense. A support person describes "I have had to get into the child's skin". The child describes the same "she knows me so well and so, she kind of took care that I can just speak aloud. She kind of spoke up for me and so, I really liked her to be there. It was kind of a good support there. Without her the meeting would not have been that good, not that good results". Another child puts it: "Probably I could have made it myself, could have said what I liked to, but yes, it was better this way, to have the … support I mean." (Reinikainen 2007, 110)

The importance of the support person was noticed. The support persons have a significant role in orientating the team to the task, to keep it there and to intervene in the discussions where they proceed in a bad direction for the child. (Mortensen 2007, 93; F, N, D.)

Between the Nordic countries there are some variations in how the support person was selected and who they were. In the Swedish data a parent often acted as the child's support person. It seemed that he or she acted like a caring parent, encouraged the child to talk or asked to repeat what the child had said earlier. It is important to make a distinction between these roles. The support persons need support from the co-ordinator to be able take distance from their normal role within the private network and clearly act as the child's support person (Åkerlund 2006, 65).

Children's experiences concerning their support persons varied a lot. At one extreme, the support person had an important role for the child. They took the task seriously, showed enthusiasm and were of great support to the children, acting as a spokesperson during the entire FGC and in close co-operation with the chair in the private phase. In these cases the support person stayed beside the child both concretely, sitting next to and consulting them, and empathically, looking at the situation from their point of view. The support person was also able to notice when a break was needed in order to ensure that the meeting could proceed constructively (F, D, N).

At the other extreme, the children did not know who their support person would have been or they considered that this was unimportant or that the support person had not been able to help them in the FGC. When they did not know about the child's or the adolescent's own worries and ideas for change, they could not ensure that those themes would be discussed in the meeting. Sometimes the support person, as a close person to the family, participated actively, but had not mentally placed themselves in the position of a support person for the child, or had not tried to understand the situation particularly from the child's perspective (Reinikainen 2007; Mortensen 2007; Omre & Schjelderup 2008).

Mortensen (2007, 90–93) found three types of capabilities that the children expected from the support person. First, the children perceived that their own relationship to the support person was important, and thus expected the support person to have good interpersonal skills. Second, they considered it to be important to be able to trust the support person's ability to direct the process to issues that are essential from their point of view. Third, the support person should have diplomatic skills to be able to balance between the child's and the parents' wishes and views and act as a mediator.

When it comes to the findings in the Nordic research, it is fair to say that seeking the support person primarily from within the child's network was considered to function well. Anyhow, to function well some prerequisites seem clear: 1) the person must be sufficiently an outsider and not too engaged in the family's matters, 2) (s)he needs to be coached sufficiently in the supportive role and understands the special role the support person has for the child in FGC.

Finally, children's participation has various faces. Each child and each case is unique and this needs special attention and in-depth examination. *Every child needs help, support and coaching to participate.* There is more potential to participate among the children than is typically noticed. Keeping a child's perspective requires determined action. Appointing a support person for the child is not enough. Careful attention needs to be focused on the mutual matching, loyalty and the internalizing of the tasks in order to be of genuine support.

Balancing power, seeking a counterpart

A central observation was that a successful shift from the information phase to the private phase was important. The information sharing phase is mainly voiced by the professionals and the way it is done becomes echoed in the private phase. The private meeting *needs information*, not only interpreted problems (D). Even if the professionals had focused on problems and the private network did not address that, it seemed to be most important that the private network did begin by clarifying the situation and hearing the child's perspective. The Nordic reflection came to the conclusion that new conflicts easily emerge in two cases: 1) if the child's voice is not heard first and 2) if the problem orientation is not left behind.

Different strategies were visible for tacking and surviving in between the worlds of professionals and the family network. The co-operation mostly went well, while only a few cases showed obvious polarisation. The families do not necessarily know what they can expect from child welfare. Growing impatience led to comments like "we are making our own plan, they can make theirs" (F; N). A basic exchange of information is needed.

Some dimensions *linked to the resources and expectations of the private network* were found. Some families withdrew and gave up. They did not demand anything

from the welfare system for their plan. The observers were convinced that in these situations the professionals ought to have taken more responsibility for offering extra support or services (D; N).

A particular type of case was observed when the person is dependent on social welfare. If there is something to hide it makes one cautious. In one case, the family hid matters and kept them private. The observer felt the behaviour was functional in this context. The meaning was not to tell everything to the child welfare or to the social worker. The network took responsibility for the situation and for the protection of the child, and made a more detailed plan than even the social worker asked for (N).

The capable network was noticed to have a strategy to produce two plans: a written plan for social workers, and another for themselves (F; N). The plans could be parallel, heading in the same direction but they may have features of a hidden agenda. These may also include action plans in more detail. Additionally, a plan for the social worker may include the social workers' expectations – and another is a mutual agreement on how they will proceed in practice. It can be seen as a question of ownership – who owns the plan that is made, and the social worker has a veto only on the written plan.

Another case with parallel plans was observed, but the family network missed capabilities, and producing two plans seemed not to be useful at all. In the end, only the private network was obliged to do anything in a family with massive problems and few resources. Nothing was written about the public support, meaning that the plan cannot be evaluated – or looking at time schedules for when things would happen etc. (Mortensen 2007, 139–148).

Some observations were reported on the interaction between the professionals and the private network. Counterparts seemed to want to study each other. One can see the parties seeking a common base or *studying each other's limits*. This is noticed between adults and adolescents in a sense that there were alliances between adults among private and professionals which did not seem to interest the adolescents. As an example, the adults had a longer discussion with the professionals about the drug using habits of the adolescent. They were trying to find a consensus at a general level, and the adolescent ended up totally outside the discussion (Åkerlund 2006, 44). The researcher observed another meeting where she notices an oppositional interaction where *friction between the parties was manifested.* Adolescents look like they are not interested in the adults' dialogues but are waiting for them to get to the point. It seemed in these examples as if the adolescent had not participated or as if the discussion was at their expense (Ibid.).

The Nordic reflection concluded that the families in FGC seemed to act like any other ordinary family: they were functional and well organised and they co-operated. The children and young people also acted like any other peer in a situation like that. Those families with a dependency on the system need special information

and also encouragement to bring forward the resources that are available to them within the welfare system.

Some general findings

There are variations between the co-ordinator systems in the Nordic countries. In Botkyrka Sweden, the co-ordinators work in a special FGC unit connected to the social services organisation. A similar professional unit does not exist in other Nordic project municipalities. The findings concerning the role of the co-ordinator are based on observations and interviews with the children. In Sweden, the research included observations on an additional meeting between the co-ordinator and the family. Åkerlund (2006, 64–65) states that the special role of the co-ordinator is echoed in the research material.

The children were mainly satisfied with the co-ordinator's work. They had hardly any specific comments on the role of the co-ordinator. It was very clear that *the role of the co-ordinator was very essential in each country* (D, F, I, N, S).

The children usually said explicitly that the meeting had been very long, or too long (Reinikainen (2007). Especially the younger children did have problems in always paying attention to what is said (Freysteinsdóttir & Árnadóttir 2007). Young people thought that meetings would be shorter if only the essential subjects were discussed properly, and less important things were left out of the discussion. However, they thought the length and tiresomeness of meetings was a minor disadvantage compared to its advantages (Reinikainen 2007).

Reinikainen (2007) discovered that the young people felt that the FGC was close to what they had expected and a good way to seek a solution to their situation. In their opinion the results of the FGC were more remarkable and more concrete than in previous meetings arranged by child protection or in previous efforts of people close to them to help/interfere. The matters were discussed more profoundly and more openly than before. Some things were discussed in the FGC for the first time where all concerned were present at the same time and had a possibility to express their views concerning events and situations. In contrast, the few younger children (aged around ten) in the study found the meetings to be useless and the plan insignificant. In discussions they were sidelined (ibid.). Also other Nordic researchers reported the same kinds of findings concerning the experiences according to age. Åkerlund (2006) even asks whether the method is applicable specifically or exclusively to young people.

Omre & Schjelderup (2008) pay attention to the variety of stimulus of things that younger children are supposed to be offered when attending the meetings. The adults (at the request of the social worker and the co-ordinator) make sure that the children have something to do and that they can focus on their favourite things in case they need to regulate the overflow of difficult things they hear. The

adults were also afraid of the children getting bored. The researchers ask whether as an unintended result, the children are protected to an extent that hampers their full participation.

The Finnish study concludes that although not all children participated actively in the discussions, in all meetings they were in a central position in creating the atmosphere. The younger children showed both by their presence and by their concrete behaviour that the adults participating in the meeting were important and close to them. Even when they felt tired during the long and intense meeting, they tried to get attention from adults and maintain a positive atmosphere. Further, young people showed through their talk and their presence that the family and close people are important to them. Mostly they participated in discussions in a conciliatory way and wanted understanding from the adult participants both for themselves and towards each other. They themselves showed an active readiness to work a lot for the common good (Reinikainen 2007).

Based on her study Reinikainen (2007) notices two kinds of processes related to the feelings of the child. The child experiences the process as empowering and significant if they get a feeling that they are primarily a source of joy to their closest family and friends, as well as if they feel they are an important person to the professionals working with them (through an atmosphere of caring), as well as if they feel themselves genuinely party of the process (through a dialogical proceeding). If, instead, a child or an adolescent gets the feeling that they are primarily a subject of worry to their closest relatives and friends and that they are a burden to the professionals working with them, or if they feel they are being sidelined in the process, they would experience the process as frustrating and insignificant. (Reinikainen 2007.)

The role of the FGC was positioned as a verifier, a forum for obtaining understanding and for integrating knowledge (D; N). Many of the children liked to have a larger group to verify what has been agreed. Mortensen (2007) interprets that being understood was important, and that this may help in achieving co-operation and integration between parts in the network.

Some quite serious reflections by the researchers need to be discussed further. Trust is something not to be risked. Some children felt bitterly betrayed:

> "I was going to walk out of the meeting when everyone was gone...but dad would get crazy, but I was going to do it...The psychologist told me that he said he would not say anything that I had told him, but then in the meeting he told everything... I hate social workers... Everyone hates psychologists, because they are so calm, they just talk in a calm way." (Freysteinsdóttir & Árnadóttir 2007)

Once trust has been broken, it is difficult to restore it. It is difficult to continue the therapy of this child. According to the researcher it also seemed difficult to continue social work with this child (I).

The researchers concluded that the family's resources should not be downplayed. Omre & Schjelderup (2008) ponder to what extent the plans made in the FGC are the family's own plans and to what extent they have been prepared taking into consideration the social workers' expectations. The researchers found that the co-ordinator is the one who assumes responsibility for the formulation of the plan, and may even make a final 'clean' copy of it. There is a risk that the co-ordinator starts to "control" the formulations of the plan rather than encouraging the private network to have their own dialogue and discussions; they need to take care that the network members themselves specify and schedule the implementation of the plan. Co-ordinators may even make their own proposals (although in these cases the researchers thought that the child's best interests were better protected as proposed by the co-ordinator). The researchers emphasise the significance of the underlying message: if the co-ordinator has doubts about the family's plan and proposes changes, this implies downplaying the family's own resources.

Although the experiences were mostly positive, the long duration of the meetings was problematic. New ways of allocating time need to be considered. Nyberg (2007) asks whether it could become established practice to immediately agree on two meetings to be arranged within a short period of time. A huge amount of work is required in order for the co-ordinator to set up the network. A certain level of intensity and concentration is necessary for the FGC. This kind of work in a difficult situation takes up a lot of all participants' energy.

In certain situations a two-day FGC could be tested: During the first day, experts and authorities could prepare a summary, each from their own point of view, and answer the questions posed by the private network. After that the members of the private network could have their own meeting to draw up a plan between themselves. The plan could then be presented and approved during the second day. Sleeping on things for a night could be beneficial. The time pressures experienced by the authorities could also be eased by dividing the FGC process between two days. After presenting their information, the authorities could leave and the private network could use as much time as they needed. Only the co-ordinator would be available until the end of the private meeting. The plan could then be explained in outline to the co-ordinator, who's task it is to ensure that the right authorities are present to comment on the plan in relation to their own area (such as school authorities' opinion concerning a proposed special arrangement).

Research-Based Child Focused Checklist

One of the aims of the Nordic research was to produce material for developing social work practice in child welfare. To this end, we produced a research-based checklist in order to provide social workers and co-ordinators with a tool for implementing Family Group Conferences in a child-oriented way. Besides Family Group Conferences, the list will help to ensure child-orientation in all kinds of work with children and more generally in social work carried out in various child welfare contexts.

No checklist or hand book will ensure that a child focus is realised in practice. We are trying to make possibilities visible where one can recognise the direction and the potential transitions. Focusing on the concrete phases and processes in the FGC and organising the checklist so that it follows these is an effective approach. Accordingly, based on the Nordic reflections, the research outcomes are presented as a checklist.

The idea of a checklist in concrete terms emerged for the first time in the final workshop of the research group. We amused ourselves by trying to find a scientific definition as a basis for organising the list. We arrived at the two concepts evidence-based research and research-based recommendations for implementing good practice. We also wanted to strengthen the awareness of the child's perspective. The checklist aims to be user-friendly, accessible for social workers and co-ordinators. We thought to call it "A Multi-national (Nordic) Research-based Child Perspective Awareness List for Social Workers and Co-ordinators in the FGC process". The language consultant Mark Phillips was helpful in finally helping to make it shorter: a "Research-Based Child-Focused Checklist", or RCC.

The checklist was elaborated by using the learning-café method. Divided into groups of three, the researchers listed check-items according to the phases of the FGC, taking turns at each phase and adding to the previous group's contributions. Thus the phases of the FGC process, preparation, meeting and follow-up were covered. In addition, a specific sheet was provided for observations concerning events between the FGC-related meetings, plus also a sheet for more general thoughts and observations for further discussion. Finally, a joint reflection took place, summing up the results obtained and refining the recommendations.

As the outlining of the checklist proceeded in accordance with the FGC phases, it became increasingly important to focus on the premises, approaches and practices and the child's rights. Although all these had already been defined as starting points of the work, we now returned to them in their real contexts. The completed research showed that had the worker not internalised the underlying purposes of actions, short-comings were also found in the realisation of the child's perspective.

The checklist was modified a number of times. First a memorandum was completed by Sarianna Reinikainen from the contributions at the final conference.

Then a round of comments was launched. Each researcher was to provide cross-referencing with their own research for the recommendations, indicating the exact pages where supporting research evidence could be found. The following checklist is the final outcome, a user-friendly summary of the Nordic research findings.

The list starts with premises, reminding us of what is really significant in family group conferencing (and in child welfare work at large). Ann Hamilton (2008) emphasizes a working method that is 'Child-Centred, Future-Focused and Blame-Free'. The check list ends up with the idea of building a reflective practice – emphasizing the necessity to arrange forums for collecting, presenting and reflecting the experiences along the process.

A research-based child-focused checklist (RCC) for Family Group Conference

Deciding how to proceed – motivation, concentration and preparation

Perspective that acknowledges the rights of children

- Children have the right to express their own views and opinions and to be heard in matters affecting them and in decisions relating to them. How to strengthen this right and make it a reality.
- Children have the right to receive support, security and protection from their private network members and from the professionals.
- The child's parents also have the right to be heard and receive support from their private network members and from the professionals.
- FGC can help to make true the children's rights – but special care has to be taken at certain sensitive points in the process.

For orientation

- If you genuinely believe in what you are doing, the clients have a better chance in trusting the method.
- If you talk to the child by trying to grasp a child perspective, there is a good chance of creating a caring atmosphere.
- If you emphasise strengths, avoid blaming, and do not focus on problems alone, people will most likely find it comfortable listening to you.
- If you do not hesitate to express your concerns and take up problems in an open way, you have a good chance of being trusted.
- People appreciate impartiality
- People appreciate talking about the child's situation.

- People appreciate being treated respectfully and considered to be trustworthy.
- Each network is unique – and has its own way of doing things.
- Cultural sensitivity and interest will be well appreciated.

Preparation phase

According to our findings

- It is good to be honest, clear and explicit in communicating with the child. The child feels better and less anxious when the process is described clearly (several times where needed) by expressing what will happen next and what kind of issues will be taken up by the professionals.
- Children appreciate that you ask if something is unclear for them and also that their questions are answered (not all children ask questions but they are pleased to hear what other children have asked in this situation and how they have been answered).
- Children are the subjects (and experts) of their own life – ignoring this would undermine the child orientation of the work.
- Securing the child's perspective in the process calls for a child-oriented "tone and tune".

Social worker

- When discussing with the child and the family/parents, the social worker becomes aware of their burdens. Finding out the burdens in advance will reduce fears and the feeling of threat when the issue is discussed in the Family Group Conference.
- Children will find it easier to attend the Family Group Conference if they have met with and talked to the social worker in advance. It is important for them to get a chance to explain their views, wishes and concerns in the preparation phase.
- The same applies to the parents. It is important that they are heard in the preparation phase.
- The child and the parents may prefer not to have some professionals present when a particular professional shares information about the child. They have their reasons and they need to be respected.
- An open agenda will produce better outcomes. If there are any preconditions for the approval of the plan, they have to be mentioned in advance.
- A good way forward is to focus on the future, to search for a solution, and to ask what the child's wishes are.
- Children appreciate co-operation (although they may not necessarily be used to this way of working) and they also appreciate that problems are defined in co-operation with them and that their own views are asked.

- Children may have their own proposals as to how to formulate the questions for the Family Group Conference, and even if not, it is important that they are given a say.
- In the information-giving phase, it is useful to coach colleagues and professionals to prepare their summaries in a child-oriented way with a view to the child's strengths.
- It may be necessary to remind colleagues and professionals that a child-friendly atmosphere is likely to occur if they present their summaries by addressing their worries directly (not in 3rd person) to the child and also by addressing the members of the family network, rather than speaking to other professionals.

Co-ordinator

- When the child, parents and other family network members attend the Family Group Conference for the first time, it is important that everyone knows what the co-ordinator's role is. It is good practice to explain your role and/ even to give reminders about it along the way.
- The better the private family network has been oriented to the meeting and "coached" on how to focus on the child, the more successful the Family Group Conference will be.
- When mapping the network it is necessary to listen very carefully for wishes or hints about a potential support person for the child. Of course, asking the child is the first place to start.
- Coaching the child's support person will ensure that the child perspective can be kept to the fore and that the child is heard and allowed to participate in the best possible way. It is advisable to ensure that the support person has understood his or her role and task and to support him/her where necessary.

Meeting

The start of the meeting and the information-giving phase

Co-ordinator

- Participants tend to feel nervous. Some of them may meet for the first time or have not talked to one another for years. It is good practice to welcome the participants and to thank them for being there for the child. The child also appreciates being shown attention personally. You can clarify the situation by reminding the participants that they have come together to discuss the child's situation.
- A number of people are present at the meeting, and the professionals may be mostly unknown to the private network. Therefore it is considerate to introduce the participants to one another

- It is good practice to check what has been agreed about the presence of the professionals and that the child and the parents do not mind if the professionals hear each others' summaries.
- A warm-up discussion helps the participants feel more relaxed but it should not go on for too long. It has been found advisable to proceed in a determined manner.
- It is good practice is to begin with the child; what the child wants to say in the beginning. If the child does not wish to speak, then the support person will be the first to start the information-giving phase.
- A higher level of intensity will be achieved for all members of the network when the child is encouraged to ask questions and the child's involvement is strengthened in all possible ways. Sometimes even the support person needs encouragement and guidance, perhaps via your example.
- Children may react to situations and what is said by making noise, by wanting to walk out of the room, or by walking in and out. It may be worth studying what has led to the reaction. It is important to stress that their presence is important and persuade them to come back.

Social worker

- It is important that the child and the parents know in advance what the social worker is going to tell the network about the child's situation.
- If they encounter a humiliating surprise at the meeting or if they hear negative things being said about themselves, it usually evokes emotions that divert lots of energy - and the matters to be discussed receive less attention.
- The child and the family network willingly listen to experts and want to know how certain problems and family situations usually affect children, how children perceive certain actions by their parents and how children of the same age usually act or what is known to be good for them.

Everyone

- Maintaining a child's perspective throughout the process can be achieved by making summaries in a child-oriented way and keeping the discussion on topic, that is, focussing on the reason why the Family Group Conference was arranged.
- It has proved important to maintain hopefulness. The private network members feel empowered to draw up a good plan together when they feel genuinely involved in the process and have their say in finding a solution in a matter that is important to the child.
- It is extremely unlikely that strengths can be over-emphasised, problems should not overshadow strengths, while at the same time they should not be ignored.

- It is important to create a constructive atmosphere that does not provoke conflicts between the child and parents.

The end of the information-giving phase

- At the information-giving phase, the family members are flooded with information that can be partly new, contradictory and even distressing. It is necessary to sum up the issues for which a plan needs to be made and to remind that the purpose of being there is to sort out the child's situation. The child's key role in making the plan can never be overemphasised.
- The members of the family network may not be wholly aware of the services available in the municipality. Providing information about the services helps them to consider alternative forms of support. Laymen often find it difficult to understand "service jargon" and they are happy to receive practical information about what kind of support is available.
- The members of the family network may also feel uncomfortable about seeking help from the authorities. They may prefer to keep solutions totally within the extended family. It sometimes helps to remind that it is not necessary that the solution should be found solely within the private network. Freedom of choice here means that the family network is genuinely able to find new combinations of resources available within the private network and public services.
- The private meeting may take longer than expected in advance. Hurrying the meeting may not be helpful. Finally, it is good to know that it is possible to take breaks in the meeting when necessary.

Approval of the plan

- The family network has worked hard. Listening to the plan proposed by the network without interruptions is respectful.
- A conversational tone and open dialogue supports the process.
- It is important to set out a timetable and responsibilities for the plan. A clear plan helps the child to understand properly who does what and when and who will react if the plan is not working. Being clear reduces the child's distress.
- The children must know what they can do themselves if the plan is not working, for example whom they can call or talk to about it.
- In order for the process to run smoothly, it is important to fix a date for the follow-up of the plan at the same time as the plan is approved.

Between the meetings

- It is important that all participants, including the authorities, follow the plan.
- If it has been agreed that the child will have a chance to describe his or her experiences to someone between the meetings, it is important to make sure that this is taken care of.
- If the family moves to another municipality when the process is ongoing, it is advisable to make sure that the following is taken care of: If the child and parents so wish, the FGC process will be continued. By a joint agreement the case is moved to a social worker in the new municipality. The matter is also discussed separately with the child.
- It is possible that things have changed so that the arrangements for the follow-up meeting need to be altered. To avoid frustration, it is advisable to check the situation before the fixed date and make the necessary preparations (social worker – co-ordinator – child – parents). The members of the family network also appreciate being informed of changes.

Follow-up meeting

Social worker

- It is particularly advisable to start by reminding the participants of all the things that have changed for the better since the plan was made.
- It is also necessary to inform about any significant events that have taken place between the meetings.
- As before, it is important to give all the information with an orientation towards the child.

Co-ordinator

- It is possible that the members of the family network have been wholly committed to the plan and may still feel disappointed or guilty about the way the plan has actually been carried out. It may be helpful to point out that changes take their courses; not everything can be anticipated.
- The Family Group Conference often launches various processes that can be seen in different ways. It is not a problem if the plan has not been realised exactly as stated. It is not necessary to examine the plan item-by-item to see how well it has worked and how its execution should be assessed. This may give rise to feelings of guilt. From the child's point of view, a more constructive approach is to discuss and assess together where the participants see changes and what has changed.

- It is important to ask the children's opinion about the plan or ask them to describe how it has worked and how the situation has changed from their point of view and what they expect to happen in the future.
- If a new follow-up meeting is regarded necessary, it is agreed on and scheduled in the same way as in the previous phase.
- When a decision is made to end the FGC process, it is good to thank the child and the family for their good work.
- Everyone should be informed of the ending of the process. It is important that the child and other participants know how each one is to carry on in the future.

Evaluation and research

- It is good practice to decide on how to follow up and evaluate the FGC practice and how to build research and practice settings.
- Face-to-face encounters are needed for sharing and reflecting on the experiences.
- Such learning spaces are also necessary among co-ordinators and social workers, but also for these and other professionals together.
- Evaluation will bring forth topics to be discussed and developed further.

Connecting research in practice – and vice versa

One of the tasks of the project was to generate dialogue between the Nordic research and local practices. In the following I shall present and discuss the methods used in the Nordic research, especially recalling the future and the child's story. Each Nordic research report includes a discussion on how the use and adaption of the research methods worked in practice and especially on the relevance of the methods for the research purpose. These experiences were presented and reflected on in the last Nordic research meeting. Secondly, I shall discuss combining research and practice especially in two of the local settings.

Methods in use

The question of confidentiality was up for discussion in all national reports, and quite obviously it is important. None of the researchers reported a serious breach of trust in the research process. The conclusion reached in the final research

meeting was emphasizing that the relevance and reliability in qualitative research is connected to how the atmosphere of trust was created and maintained between the interviewer and the child. This reminds us of something similar that has been noticed also in social work settings when the case is investigated together with the family.

Each researcher who carried out the interviews has worked with children; they have interviewed children both as practice workers and as researchers. The method felt easy to use but it did call for some special attention. It worked well (D, N, F) but there were some differences: In Iceland the interviewed children seemed to be fed up with future-oriented solution-based questions; they had had enough of these before (I). In Sweden the experiences were not reported, and the method was used only in a few cases.

Experiences of using the recalling the future -method varied according to the researcher. The most difficult thing for the professionals - and also for the clients – has been to ”get” oneself into the good future and ”keep” oneself there. This challenge has also been reported elsewhere. Putting one's soul into the future seems easier for children than for the adults; and for the professionals it is more difficult than for private network members (Kokko 2006). In the Nordic research it seemed easy for the children to tell about their wishes for the future (Omre & Schjelderup 2008) and it was also considered easy to follow up these elements in the good future (F, D, N).

According to the researchers, keeping the child perspective in research was not self-evident. In many ways it required questioning our own underlying traditional ways of thinking. This gave rise to many self-adjustments and increased the focus on the child's voice. An example from the Norwegian reflection: ”We have realised how one can be unaware of having a paternalistic understanding and interpretation. But we have also realised how willingly children participate in the interviews and their seriousness throughout the interview and their accurate descriptions when they regard something as important.” (Omre & Schjelderup 2008)

Recalling the future was the method for generating the child's own dimensions for assessment. In this sense it is worth repeating that the method helped to study the child perspective - we could even say that the method generated the child perspective. It worked as a way of making the dimensions visible and for ensuring the changes were followed up. And finally, we could see how some of the children got encouraged by realising their own ambitions. This strengthens the suggestion for such elements to be adapted more generally into social work with children.

By recalling the future, important information besides assessment dimensions was produced. The matters the child saw as important were different to the definitions arrived at through the authority of professionals. The future recollections of children made it possible to follow the changes from the child's point of view.

Constructing the child's story together with the child had several benefits. First, the process seemed to increase motivation and commitment to participate in the

research. This had, of course, a bearing on the quality of data. Secondly, it seemed a good tool for validating the triangulated data.

Producing the child's stories gave some insights into how to support children's own understanding of their situation and possible solutions to it. The child's story worked as an "external" tool. Especially in the final encounter, when the whole process was written down, it offered a mirror for looking at and interpreting the situation. The research method also offered the children new ways to participate in the process. Used in the middle of the process it also seemed to work as an intervention, to strengthen the participation of the child (D, F, N). At its best, it started and accelerated children's own coping processes. As a method for producing a life story, it could be applied more extensively in all social work and with children placed outside home.

Reinikainen (2007, 49–50) describes how she felt bad about having to move the interview on when the children started to enthusiastically tell her about their beloved pets or other things important to them, even if the children clearly found the stuff from the main agenda to be much less exciting. Reinikainen asks how often do children and adolescents have an opportunity to discuss their own views with an attentive adult. Möller (2006) contemplates children's narratives in child welfare contexts: "It seems there is no room in child welfare for such narratives as when children tell things for no particular reason". Children's narratives are expected to focus on what the professionals need to know for their work. If such information is not obtained, the professionals may feel that the encounter with the child was not successful as they "got nothing" from the child.

Similarly the researcher was expected to "keep to the point" in the interviews with the children, directing the discussion towards topics that were important for the purposes of the research. The interview was to benefit the research, and the amount of time that children and adolescents (as well as adults) can concentrate is, of course, limited. Just as the concerns of social workers direct the discussions with children in child welfare contexts, so it was also true that the interviews with children were directed by the research questions and the thematic framework of the interview. It is not surprising that shifts in topics from those chosen by children and those imposed by the researcher sometimes seemed to be shifts from a dialogue to a discussion (Isaacs 2001) or, at worst, to an "interrogation".

> Something that we not have implemented in this first study was using the child's competence and knowledge in the planning of the study. To some extent they were given an opportunity to confirm or correct the findings that we present here. But the knowledge that children communicated through the interviews has increased our competence in subsequent interviews (Omre & Schjelderup 2008).

Thus, one of the lessons to be learned from an intensely child-resource and participation-oriented study is, that one can and ought to be even more child-resource and participation-oriented.

Research and practice in the context of local projects

How would we call our way of combining research and practice locally? There was no one way of realizing the research in local settings. The settings varied according to the researching institute and the participating municipalities. The practice research setting was established more explicitly in the capital area of Finland and the Botkyrka area of Sweden. In Iceland the researchers from the University of Reykjavik worked together with the city professionals, while in Norway, the University of Stavanger co-operated with the city. In Denmark, there were several municipalities included all over the country. Only the experiences from Finland and Sweden are reported below.

The national FGC project in Finland was carried out in close co-operation with researchers and municipal actors. We had worked together in the previous project, so it was not difficult to communicate and find out the common interests in the new project. People in the Finnish capital area also looked forward to continuing co-operation with the people involved in the Swedish Botkyrka practice, whom they already knew, and awaited widening contacts with other Nordic cities.

The plan was discussed with the local FGC project leader Juha-Pekka Vuorio several times – he even participated in the Nordic research group meetings (as did the Swedish practice leaders) during the first two years. The start-up phase of the Nordic research project involved practitioners who participated in discussions on the research plan and commented on the plan particularly from the perspective of the need to develop the FGCs. The plan was also presented to the steering group of the FGC project in the Helsinki metropolitan area (made up of three cities, who financed the practice).

Timetabling and the division of tasks and participation were agreed through discussion. The practice workers had an important role in presenting the idea to the clients, and connecting people. The procedures were followed up and discussed, while the project leader kept the steering group up to date with the research and made suggestions for practice development. The Finnish FGC practice setting changed over the course of the research project: in the beginning, all the co-ordinators did their FGC work in addition to their permanent jobs, though eventually a full-time co-ordinator was established, which reflected the Botkyrka model. The co-ordinator joined the discussions with the researcher and the local research group.

The research plan, the observations and experiences gathered during the research process, as well as the final report were presented and discussed both with the steering group of the FGC project and with the social workers and co-ordinators.

The discussions were fruitful, they supported the implementation of the research and helped to improve practices and practice development. *Research-based practice development* can be exemplified by a case where dialogue between a researcher and a co-ordinator about the realisation of the child perspective led to new experiments carried out by the practitioners themselves and to changes in the existing model even before the reporting of the research. Attention was paid to the social worker's questions and observations concerning the way in which professionals speak in the information phase of the FGC process. In addition, the observations made during the private network's own meeting led the practitioners to consider how to ensure that the handling is appropriately focussed and that the child perspective is kept to the fore. The co-ordinators decided to start the FGC meeting with the child perspective: the children themselves or their support persons express their views of why the FGC has been organised. At the same time the participants can orient themselves to the child's concerns and need for support and solutions. From the very beginning, it is made clear to the adults why they have gathered together.

As was made clear earlier, the dialogical nature of the research design not only referred to dialogues between researchers and practitioners. Knowledge was produced together with clients, and specifically with the children and young people. In addition to being interviewees and objects of research and observation, they participated in producing research material by assessing researcher interpretations several times during the process. The aim was to emphasise the experiences of children and young people – who tend to be sidelined in child welfare processes, as well as in society (and research) in general – and to attempt to look at the situation and the FGC process both from their perspective and from a more broadly defined child perspective.

The Swedish colleague, Eva Nyberg, has a somewhat different approach to research and development but she nevertheless ends up drawing similar conclusions. She describes the development in the interaction between research and practice from a researcher's perspetive, but also as a leader of one FoU-unit (Research and Development unit). For more than 10 years she has gained insights into developments both as a teacher at the University of Stockholm and through projects run by a municipality development unit. She has pondered over the issue of measurement in social work and criticised the choices made in the context of a national follow-up study of the FGCs in Sweden. She states that research reports where the practitioners cannot recognise their work has no relevance to practice. If the researcher alone determines the criteria for measuring the results, the results will hardly be seen as trustworthy from the practical perspective.

Eva Nyberg (2007) looks back at research in practice and she analyses the development at FoU-Södertörn where several evaluations of social work have taken place: "We have had many opportunities to study our own failure to implement the research and evaluation results. We have again and again drawn the conclusion that what these studies or evaluations have in common, is that they have been what

we traditionally define as an external evaluation. The researcher formulates the questions, decides what method to use, interprets the result with the use of some theories, and finally hands over a research report in a nice package. In a seminar the study is presented for the practitioners whose work has been examined. And our experience is that the practitioners say, politely 'Thank You, very interesting'. And after this they return to their weekday duties. As before."

Eva Nyberg reports on *practitioner's e*xtended participation in the research process: "As a research unit organised within the practice field of social services, FoU-Södertörn has a special motive and responsibility to handle the question of the implementation of findings from research and evaluations. When proceeding with planning the Nordic project it was then natural to consider the relationship between research design and implementation. How to design the research in such as way as to engage the practitioners´ interest is a challenge. From our experience the path to this is through an *extended participation for the practitioners* in all phases of the research. This experience of the necessary participation for the practitioner in research can be seen as an equivalent to the idea of client participation in social work: more participation in decisions about changes in the life situation makes the changes more sustainable". (Nyberg 2007.)

In the Nordic context, it can be said that the formulation of the research design and the implementation of the research has been a multi-facetted process at several different levels. A common feature has been that the child-oriented approach has gained a stronger foothold in all countries over the years, in both research and practice, thanks to and in spite of this research.

The dynamics of research and practice are different. The process of change, the process of initiating changes varies between practice and research. The basic task of research and practice is not the same. Analysing and presenting these processes side by side inspired in a co-operative setting where a research program in child protection social work was drafted (Pösö & Heino 2003) in a previous project in Finland (in Laiho & Ritala-Koskinen (ed.) 2003).

The process of creating research-based knowledge and the process of child protection work are not alike. Research outcomes as such do not usually transform into child protection work. Nor do the challenges of child protection work and management translate into research questions as such. When two different processes are brought into contact, it is necessary to find interfaces, forms of activity and content that produce mutually advantageous combinations. Common arenas and themes are not typically available. They have to be sought, found, created, mobilized and kept alive. Creating such collaboration between research and practice takes time, and the task of nurturing common arenas should be made the responsibility of some. It was also discovered that the collaboration and dialogues between research and practice should be built into processes from the very beginning and all the way to the end - from identifying problems and formulating research and

development themes, to interpretation and evaluation of outcomes (Pösö & Heino 2003).

Furthermore, child protection is an area where important knowledge cannot be achieved by one way only. Experiential knowledge is important along with measurable and outwardly observable knowledge. Collaboration aims at scientifically compelling, experientially tested and ethically derived knowledge.

The discussion on combining and organising research and practice in social work has fluctuated in the Nordic countries. Some years ago the discussion was active, at times even fierce. In 2005 great concern was expressed on the topic in the Nordic FORSA (researching social work) congress, where it was noted that an evidence-based research setting was generally conducive to obtaining finance, while other qualitative and dialogue-based settings were seen to be positioned at the periphery. Comparative statistical studies have been the research method of the mainstream not only in Nordic countries but also in the context of the European Union and internationally. Dialogical and collaborative research settings that focus on other kinds of knowledge have more often been placed at the margins.

Summary

Plenty of research knowledge obtained over the years provides evidence of the benefits of the FGC and its functionality as a method. The issue was here examined with the child's perspective as the focus: How does the FGC manage to bring out the views of children, strengthen their position and protect their best interests? How could its different phases be further improved to strengthen the child's position?

The Nordic research had several aims. The first was to seek and develop an alternative way to explore the FGC and social work in general, and to strengthen the position of research that focuses on the child. Based on the experiences, we can indeed say that we did find an alternative way to study the changes together with the children; a way that can be used in social work practices in general.

The Nordic research also aimed at strengthening the position of the child and keeping the child perspective visible in child protection social work. We believe that the findings and methods contributed to this. As mentioned, the co-operation on research and practice produced changes in practice and in the way we carried out and interpreted the research (Vuorio & Hänninen & Saurama Eds. 2008).

The research was carried out in a child protection context in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and in Sweden. The research questions in the national settings were: 1) What is the situation like prior to the FGC from the child's point of view and how does it change during and after the FGC? 2) How do children experience the FGC as a method? 3) How is a child perspective realised in practice in the FGC?

The national data were manifold. The researchers interviewed each child 3-4 times during the process. The follow-up time ended with the last interview one year after the first FGC. The researchers observed the children and other participants in the FGC (including during the follow-up FGC) and also in the private phase. The documents generated in the FGC-process were gathered. Some of the researchers produced the child's story about the changes and experiences together with the child. The number of children taking part in the research varied from 3–10 in each country, with 35 children altogether. Less than half were younger children (7–12 years old) while the rest were adolescents (13–17 years old). The material was triangulated and analysed both case by case and according to themes.

The children's situations varied before the FGC. All of them were defined as being in need of child protection. Some situations were quite serious and challenging. The children wished to see changes happen, and indeed, some changes did happen.

The changes detailed through the Recalling the future -method were followed up. It worked well in making visible the child's wishes for future development and in evaluating the proceedings from an individual perspective. Triangulation was

used when producing the child's story. The story-method worked well and was seen as a good tool for social work in general.

The changes experienced by children were mostly for the better. The Nordic children pointed out similar life issues that they wanted to see changed: relations with and between the parents, the situation at home and with friends and peers, connected to everyday circumstances (school, work, free time) but also connected to the identity and self. The most important issue for the children seemed to be that their biggest worries had decreased. This seemed to influence other things and areas of life – including those areas not mentioned in the questions formulated for the FGC to solve.

It often happened that the dimensions that the children considered the most important were seen by adults as being of minor importance, if not totally invisible.

The children had different positions regarding how they saw and understood the changes and how they saw their own role in bringing about those changes. Some children were self-reliant and knew what they can do in the situation to make it better. Those who saw their own role as central were able to mobilise new resources and their situation was better after one year. One's conclusion is therefore that the children differed in how much they thought the FGC had a role in the changes that happened. The FGC seemed to function as initiator, launcher or as a maintainer of the changes. Some children believed that the changes had happened independently of the FGC, others thought that the effects were specifically because of the FGC.

The children were quite satisfied about the composition of the private network that were invited and present in the meeting. The parents may hesitate over the possibility of getting help from the private network. The adolescents' sensitive concern was focused more to themselves, they were afraid of being rejected in case the invited persons failed to show up.

The experiences from the information-giving phase varied. Criticism was focused around several topics. The main impression was that the information given by professionals does not include the child's perspective in the sense that the child's own views or statements are not cited or set forth. The summaries given by professionals ranged from encouraging views to descriptions of problem behaviour. The style and language also varied by profession. Patterns of expression varied from a commonplace subjectivising language to a diagnostic objectivising language. Some of the summaries reflected a picture that was burdened by worries and difficulties and gave a depressing image of the child. It seemed that the influence of negative characterizations about the child's emotions and self-concept had not been taken into account. These kinds of summaries do not show trust or seek after strengths. This seems to miss the possibility to create fruitful grounds for empowerment or building on resources.

The atmosphere generated in the information-giving phase seemed to carry over into the private meeting. It had obviously been a strange situation for the

family to begin the private meeting following the sharing of a wealth of knowledge. Sometimes the information they had heard aroused contradictory emotions or somebody got irritated. They were often coming up against something new, for the first time in their lives. The feeling in starting the private meeting was described as clumsy, painful, odd, expectant, difficult, and dubious.

Each private network managed to get the private meeting going and to move ahead with it. This forms a kind of a team-building process in practice. The attitude was expressed for example that ”we are not the professionals in these matters, but we solve this our own way”. Most commonly the private network took their task very constructively, and they orientated to the child and her/his future. As a few people described ”it’s the child that matters”, ”we are here for the child”. Some tried very hard to look forward and forget the past, a few just could not do it. In these cases the contradictions between, for example, divorced parents were serious and obvious. Anyhow, every private network took their tasks seriously. The process of producing the plans was usually intensive and serious, and under the constructive leadership of a private network member.

The researchers observing the private phases were surprised with what they saw. They also reported insights about their own prejudices, noting that the network was more capable than they had thought, ”they were just like us”. The atmosphere was interpreted as honest – the participants did not try to put difficult things aside, though dealing with serious problems. The private network’s ability to balance the conflicts was surprising. The researchers witnessed the private network’s capability to clarify and create tranquillity in the private discussion while seeking the solutions. Creative solutions were also found, and they were sometimes very ”easy” and concrete.

The significance of the private network as a mediator was visible in many of the meetings. Resources for the solution were found. The children were satisfied and sometimes even surprised by the activity shown by some people. The most positive surprise for the children was when it led to a better common understanding, despite differences in opinion. Thus, the private meeting obviously serves functions other than just planning and decision-making.

The atmosphere in the private meetings varied. In general the atmosphere was sensed to be good. Children seemed to be happy. Usually they had been looking forward to the meeting. It was obvious that when the atmosphere was caring, children enjoyed the discussions and they enjoyed the feeling of a close connection with the extended family.

Some social workers and other professionals have reported being concerned about possible violence and harmful acts within the private meetings. On the basis of the Nordic research one can state: Trust and give space for things to sort themselves out! If the private meeting is not very constructive at that particular time, some constructive processes can still be initiated there. It takes time to see the full result. During the follow-up period, there were examples of ”cleansing”

episodes, where terrible shame and guilt was felt and encountered. Afterwards the child said that she was pleased about what happened. Reconciliation, forgiveness, and understanding were expressed and observed in the private phases.

The child's level and form of participation varied in the private meetings in every country. In general the children said they felt more of a participant than in the traditional meetings. They also felt that they had been listened to better than before. In general, adolescents had a stronger position and say in the meeting than the younger children. For the most part, the adults gave room to the children to participate. There were also adolescents and children who seized their role as an active participant and didn't wait for the adults to give permission to participate. Some young children were bypassed, even when they sometimes tried to attract attention by being loud. The child's reactions can also be interpreted as a reaction to the process.

Children were more visible in the private phase. In phases 1 and 3 there were more monologues, as well as dialogues between adults. The adolescents were most visible in the private meetings, although their activity is not to be exaggerated. The actual participation of the children seemed to be fleeting in nature. Though the adults welcomed the adolescent's involvement, they were sometimes observed to be more interested in communication between themselves.

For those participating in the first FGC meeting, it was a new experience working with such a format.. As would be expected, the children participated more actively in the follow-up meetings than in the first FGC meetings. They were more visible and involved. They felt surer of themselves, and their competencies received more room than in the previous meeting.

Children's experiences of participating seemed to be connected to age and gender. Children differed in how actively, courageously and spontaneously they brought forth their views, worries and wishes in the meetings. Also their own experience of participating in discussions and in making a plan varied from total non-participation to determined, active participation. Children usually had strong views and opinions concerning their own and the family's situation, but they were clearly aware of their subordinate position in a process guided and led by adults. They hoped that their views would have some weight.

The younger children's understanding of the proceedings as well as of the matters to be resolved in the FGC was weak. Some younger children were bypassed, even when they sometimes tried to be noticed by being loud.

It was easier for the adolescents than for the younger children to understand the discussions, to participate verbally and to have room for a dialogue. The young women seemed to be more active and determined in bringing forth and defending their views than the young men. Most of the young women participated centrally in the discussion and in making the plan, and not less than any adult participant in the meeting. They felt responsible and capable of assessing what was essential to their well-being in the situation. They also brought forth their views strongly with credible arguments. The young men, in contrast, were clearly more quiet

but participated at times, especially when something was asked of them. To some extent they participated also spontaneously in the discussion. In the interviews they indicated considering themselves as responsible and capable of assessing their own situation as well as the young women did, but in the meetings they did not bring their views forward as actively and determinedly.

In most of the meetings the focus was kept on the child. There were moments when the focus was about to shift to other questions, but perhaps surprisingly, it was not only once but quite often that the child or adolescent her/himself intervened and sometimes took the responsibility to guide the discussion back to the point.

Most children involved in the Nordic research had a support person during the process. There was a noticeable difference if there was not a person accompanying the child, helping her to understand and to express herself. "It is important to have somebody to stand up for me". The focus on the child was better than without this kind of help. The children expected and listed some competencies concerning the support person: maintaining balance in relation to the child, and in relation to the chair person; diplomatic balancing skills in general were welcome.

Support persons took various roles in the private phase. Some were passive, some active, some were highly appreciated within the network, having contacts with everyone, some were less known by others. If the support person was able to act as a nexus, (s)he could act like a chair person, guiding the private meeting.

If the professionals had, in the information phase, focused on problems and if the private network did not address that, it seemed to be of utmost important that the private network began by clarifying the situation and hearing out the child's perspective. Sometimes new conflicts emerged when the child's voice was not heard first.

The families seemed to act like any other ordinary family: they were functional and they were well organised. Those families with a dependency on the welfare system need special information and encouragement to bring forward the resources that are available to them within the welfare system.

Finally, children's participation has various faces. Each child and each case is unique and this needs particular attention and in-depth examination. Every child needs help, support and coaching on participation. There is more potential to participate among the children than is generally noticed. Keeping a child's perspective requires determined action. Appointing a support person for the child is on its own not sufficient. To be of genuine support, careful attention needs to be focused on the mutual matching, loyalty and the internalizing of the tasks.

One of the aims of the Nordic research was to produce material for developing social work practice in child welfare. To this end, we produced a research-based checklist in order to provide social workers and co-ordinators with a tool for implementing Family Group Conferences in a child-oriented way. Besides Family Group Conferences, the list will help to ensure a child-orientation in all kinds of work with children and more generally in social work carried out in various child welfare contexts.

Discussion

There are three themes with which to conclude: the child perspective, social work, and implementation. Each of these is discussed briefly.

Child perspective

The concepts of child perspective and the best interests of the child work well as rhetoric and argumentation when discussing with decision-makers and with parents. These concepts are emotionally loaded, hardly anyone wants to act against the best interests of a child. In that sense, it is an efficient means of influencing and controlling (Heikkilä 2008). The child perspective has also worked as a concept put to use in our research practice, as a means of orientating the work. At an abstract level this concept lives its own life, and in concrete contexts, at the child level, it can have another life. The concept used in the FGC context was made more concrete by focusing on the phases of FGCs and connecting it to concrete functions so as to determine the crucial points for the realisation of a child perspective in practice. As a research outcome, a checklist was created in order to affect practice.

The child perspective takes time to gain momentum in practice - as do all changes to governing strategies and power relationships.

On the basis of research evidence and observations in practice, Dalrymple (2002) argues that Family Group Conferencing can also be a form of adult decision-making where children feel as powerless as in the more traditional case conferences. The mere method is not the issue, but rather the way in which those adults of the private network and the professionals act in relation to the children and how the child perspective is materialised in social work and other professions in general.

Based on the research, we agree with Sieppert & Unrau (2003, 118), who underlined that it cannot be taken for granted that children participate in the FGC just because they are present. Rather, attention must be paid to the process by which children are included. These processes and phases in which to intervene are various. Some of them can not be affected directly. Anyhow, it is possible to focus attention on these phases. It is exactly this we try to achieve with the research based checklist. We do not think that following it mechanically will ensure a child perspective. Instead, we hope that it will make more visible the sensitive points where a child perspective may even in FGCs remain rhetorical, but can also be materialised in practice.

We want to emphasise culture and attitudes, not technicalities. Sieppert & Unrau (2003) point out three biases which would need further inquiry: 1) the

assumption that professionals know what is best for clients, 2) the assumption that adults know what is best for children, 3) the knowledge that culture and ethnicity impacts how families view their situations and make decisions. Culture is one of the contexts, generational circles another.

As Nigel Thomas and Claire O'Kane (2000) argue, both in research and practice, a commitment to involving children in the decision-making must go hand in hand with a determination to find methods of communication that enable children to demonstrate their competence. They state that it is challenging to get rid of restrictive traditional ways of case working and so promote the liberating and empowering traditions of case working. In response, we would add that it is challenging to get rid of the restrictive traditional ways of researching the child perspective and so to promote the liberating and empowering traditions of studying with children. Nigel Parton (2003, 13) states that the contemporary social work encourages service users to tell their story of the problem in a way that externalizes it, giving more control and agency and creating a new perspective on how to manage or overcome it – instead of providing the practitioner with information about the causes of problems so that s/he can make the assessment so as to prescribe a 'scientific' solution. In keeping with Parton's analysis, a paradigm shift is visible in this change of approach. He (ibid.) concludes that contemporary social work emphasises certain key elements, such as process, the plurality of both knowledge and voice, possibilities, and the relational quality of knowledge. Such elements have also been emphasised in this Nordic study.

Jane Dalrymple (2002) argues that distinguishing children and young people's power from parental and professional power permits their empowerment through the use of advocacy. An independent advocacy or a network advocacy is the focus of her evaluation study. The hypothesis is that the family nexus can be as institutionally excluding as any other adult forum. Problematising the context is not only a question of the technical solution concerning the support person but the question also encompasses the child and adult institutions. The adults involved are required to consider the operation of power through themselves and *the child concerned*. She sees the practicalities of enabling the voices of children to be heard in FGCs as formidable. European culture, which distinguishes childhood as a period of protected development within a nuclear family, invalidates a culture of independent advocacy within FGCs. The challenge, both for independent and natural advocates, is to examine their own power as adults in relation to the children they are working with and to identify how to use that power (Dalrymple 2002, 298).

Dalrymple's ideas resemble the concerns of Moran-Ellis & Sünker which we could join, too. They argue for the generational relationships to be governed, not only relationships with children. Creating the conditions in which children can be genuinely empowered to feel 'entitled' and self-determined to participate in social and political life depends on giving the politics of childhood full attention, and connecting it with the realisation of children's rights in everyday life. Analyses of

power and culture must incorporate the generational structuring of adult–child relations and of society as a whole (Moran-Ellis & Sünker 2008, 68).

Challenging social work

Discussing the characteristics of FGC in the context of social work one may ask: is there a challenge or is it just a question of a special and common dimensions to strengthen and to go ahead; what kinds of similarities are noticeable? Jan Fook (2000) studied the key characteristics of expertise in social work. A major theme that came through was the complexity of practice situations, and the ability of the experienced workers to handle complexity. They dealt with a range of diverse situations, involving many players with competing and often conflicting interests, yet were able to prioritize important factors quite readily. Closely related to the issue of complexity was the issue of context. The practitioners were generally able to be aware of the contextual factors which they could or could not control, and were able to fashion strategies accordingly. Another major theme was the lack of formal theory. However, practitioners had developed their own frameworks for making sense of what they did, and had recourse to isolated concepts when these appeared meaningful to them. They had clear rationales for their practice, but these rationales did not fit any textbook conceptualisations (ibid.).

Listening to clients is part of social work both in a practical and theoretical sense. According to Fook 2000 (see Parton 2003, 3–4), social workers constructed a process whereby the 'theory' of how to help the service user was *generated mutually*. There was an openness to the service users' experience and engagement in a process that enabled them to communicate it. Despite having clear rationales, a sense of *uncertainty* pervaded many accounts. 'It was as if they were willing to risk uncertainty for the sake of constructing the most relevant process and outcome for service users' (Fook 2000, 112). Experienced practitioners identified 'expertise' as being related to the ability to engage in a process with situations rather than being associated simply with the achievement of a specific type of outcome. In summary, expertise in social work, is characterized by an ability to work in complex situations of competing interests, and prioritize factors in ways which allow clear action. In so doing they are open to change and uncertainty, able to create the theory and knowledge (often in a mutual way with service users) which is needed to practice relevantly in differing contexts, and to locate themselves squarely in these contexts as responsible actors (Fook 2000, 113). Expectations and list of abilities for social work and for social workers seems quite demanding.

Nigel Parton (2003, 2–3) argues in his article that there is a range of skills that have traditionally lain at the core of social work, particularly related to the process and where the ability to negotiate and mediate with creativity are of particular relevance, but which are in great danger of being lost. Is it here we can point out an

intermediate zone of the public – private or the professional – personal where an invitation goes out to the co-ordinator to provide mediation in social work? The co-ordinator also needs the ability to work in complex situations of competing interests, even between the family and social worker, especially when mutual trust is weak.

Titcomb & LeCroy (2003, 64) from Arizona call for changes in both the families and the child protection system, as complex situations are meeting a complex agency system. Walton & Roby (2003, 88) conclude that scepticism is based on a lack of trust. In the FGCs that they have studied in Utah, they observed very few changes in settings where families do not have confidence in the child protection system, and where social workers do not trust the families. Joan Pennell (2003) reminds us that behind these questions is a profound ambivalence towards loosening control, and that can only be resolved through actually seeing how conferencing worked.

Elisabeth Backe-Hansen (2006) sees empowering underprivileged groups as a political goal. Studies show that social workers have found it hard to give responsibility to families. They prefer to regulate the information made available to the family and deciding upon meeting arrangements and child participation. Backe-Hansen asks whether it is automatic and inevitable that the social worker loses power as the family gains it. She reminds us that power is not a zero-sum game. Power can be seen as an expanding dimension, a social construction and dynamic phenomenon that is not in the hands of the family or the social workers alone (ibid.).

Social workers can also be seen as objects of power. They do not have the power to decide on a child protection matter or FGC alone. Strategies and budgets are decided elsewhere. Social workers are increasingly under the control of superiors and pressure from outside, from the legal system, media, etc. In the narrow room for manoeuvre that they have, they may think twice about delegating power to clients' personal networks. However, FGCs can also empower the social worker (Lupton & Nixon 1999; Heino 2001, 55).

FGC has several unique characteristics which challenge social work. In the following, the characteristics are described and discussed as constituting certain *new elements and structures* which could strengthen the new paradigm and give rise to a reconstruction of social work more generally. Social work in child welfare has a position in the middle of various muddles and contradictions which easily create atmospheres of mistrust. There is room for neutral partners to intervene. In FGCs the public agency (represented by a social worker in child protection) delegates some of its tasks to an independent person, a co-ordinator. This builds a kind of a *mediation structure* into the process. It is important that the co-ordinator is viewed as a neutral player by those concerned, and as trustworthy to guide the process.

Second, those invited and included in the decision-making process form an essentially wider network of people. Such personal network resources are not regularly utilized in traditional social work. Mapping out who are the meaningful

persons connected to the child and to the other family members creates a *model for inviting the larger private network to participate.* The invitation is not only for those having a juridical status in the case but for those having a human status, being socially significant for the child.

Third, dealing with the case means not only extending to the private network but also reaching out to other actors outside of social agencies: to other professions and institutions that are connected and/or actually work with the child and the family. Cross-sectoral and multi-professional work has been a challenge in child protection work for quite a while. In FGC a new kind of *co-ordinative structure for multi-professional co-operation* is created. The role of social work becomes clearer and also the connecting nature of social work becomes more evident. The role of a case manager enriches with new dimensions to conquer.

Fourth, in FGC *transparency* is introduced. The authorities and professionals present their information openly to the child, family and private network. The authorities make their worries explicit concerning the child. They tell what they know about the situation and what must be changed in the best interest of the child. Those in the private network have an opportunity to ask the professionals to clarify what they mean and to explain the information base they use for their interpretations. The private meeting offers the network a chance to make use of their knowledge and to produce their own suggestions as to how to solve the matter at hand. They make their viewpoints visible, and they also present a plan to the social workers on what stance they are wiling to take.

Fifth, social work in child welfare has been criticised for mixing the central roles in the decision-making process when investigation, decision-making and enforcement are all included. The social worker makes the final decision in FGC as she does in social work. In FGC the basic information (investigation) is shared by the connected professionals. The suggestion is made by the family and private network. If there is something suspicious in the plan presented by the private network, it is brought up by the social workers, and the motivations are presupposed explicitly, before accepting the plan. This brings an alternative approach to decision-making, it brings *a more democratic and open decision-making structure* in child protection work.

Social work includes some obscure processes where it is difficult for a client to know where the matter is proceeding and what is going to happen next (Heino 1997). Clients report that FGCs are clear, as they get to know in advance what is going to happen in a meeting. *Structuring the process in phases* has given value to social work.

Finally, *FGC generates a process – or processes.* The follow-up meetings are agreed upon, and the plan is evaluated as a whole. To oversee the process is however something more than just to follow the plan. The structure of following up and proceeding by a time schedule is a special feature in FGC. During the follow-up

several processes seem to start developing. The characteristics of parallel processes on various levels form the elementary context of social work.

Research has brought to light interesting differences in how everyday life actors and professional helpers regard making and following up plans, and how the plans as such are valued (Marsh & Walsh 2006). Holland et al. (2003) found that the FGC is for children more significant emotionally than in terms of its concrete outcomes. For the children the most important thing about the conference was to meet members of the private network and to express their own views, while finding concrete solutions was ranked only third in order of importance. By contrast, the adult members of the private network, the social worker, and the co-ordinator felt the most important thing was to find solutions.

Pulling through everyday life challenges differs from negotiating professional difficulties. Peter Marsh and Dawn Walsh (2006) underline that the plan that is drawn up at the FGC is more than just a plan. They pay attention to the significant difference between the professionals' and the family's perception of the plan. They describe such a plan as a hybrid that combines the everyday lives of professionals and the family. The members of the family read the plan from between the lines so as to anticipate its implementation and to ponder what it means from their point of view. They see the plan as the beginning of a journey. The professionals, in turn, check to what extent the plan has been implemented, reading it item by item. The family members see the plan as a continuum and a process, and the social workers see it from an episodic view. Accordingly, it is important to distinguish professional plans and systematic working methods from the family's actions and how they think the plan should be implemented – these are basically different. Accordingly, as Parton (2008) supposes, a consequence could be that a more technical approach monopolises the space over a more relation-oriented social work approach.

In line with this, a Finnish social worker held up the following principle as a personal guideline: "I always accept the plan that the family has made but I also insist that the follow-up meeting should be held relatively soon. The FGC also starts processes that cannot be anticipated. Only after having gained experience of the implementation of the plan is each participant is able to assess from their own point of view what works and what doesn't. As a social worker, I can see which of the processes that have been started are advancing the child's best interests" (Heino & Kaatra & Korhonen & Possauner & Vuorio 2005).

The same kind of elements were noticed earlier, during the private network's planning processes. The Norwegian researchers saw a risk that the co-ordinator starts to "control" the formulations of the plan rather than encourage the private network to have their own dialogue and discussions. The researchers too take care that the network members themselves specified and scheduled the implementation of the plan. Co-ordinators may even make their own proposals (although in these cases the researchers thought that the child's best interests were better protected as proposed by the co-ordinator). The researchers emphasise the significance of the

underlying message: if the co-ordinator has doubts about the family's plan and proposes changes, this implies downplaying the family's own resources (Omre & Schjelderup 2008). There is a very sensitive line to be found. Is there someone who owns the plan?

Question of implementing

I have been surprised with how different children use similar words when describing some of their experiences concerning FGCs. Similar quotations can be found not only in the Nordic reports but also from children's accounts in other countries (Beek 2008; von Spiegel 2008). Though the research samples are often small, it is astonishing how similarly the children express their experiences. "Do they really want to come to my FGC?" describes both joy and disbelief, and was interpreted as showing how little confidence the children had had about the degree of real concern that people had for them and how much they could take care of them. Similar accounts of the meetings and consequent events show a focus on anxiety before the meeting: "I had butterflies in my stomach". Are we then talking about something universal?

It is worth asking, as Elisabeth Backe-Hansen (2006) does; why a loaded practice with almost exclusively positive feedback has not taken root in mainstream work? Why is FGC still at the margins of social work, and not integrated in its prevailing activity? Suspicion vis-á-vis the FGC has been reported in most of the countries adopting it. Difficulties have not only been practical but also administrative and strategic. Sundell et al. (2001) have considered the overwhelmingly positive attitudes among social workers towards FGC in Sweden and in the UK, and the result that only 42% of social workers had initiated at least one FGC. Those who did initiate FGC thought they were implementing a top-down policy.

Backe-Hansen (2006) suggests comprehensive statistical studies based on controlled designs and sees Knut Sundell's (2002) follow-up study as a rare example of it. FGC's efficacy has often been assessed on the basis of the implementation of the plan or by inspecting documents and registers as to whether the case is back in proceedings or if the child is placed outside home after a period of time following the FGC (as was the case in Sundell's study). However, several FGC studies emphasize the process nature of the practice. The implementation of the plan as such is not necessarily the most essential factor, but rather the fact that there are safeguarding adults around the child keeping an eye on developments, supporting and intervening in agreed ways. A substantial factor is also that the decision to place the child may be reached in collaboration and put into practice as a jointly founded and sometimes even tested solution, together with the private network.

FGCs along with other network- and dialogue-based practices calls for paradigmatic change in professional help and in defining professionalism. So even

though the method is easy to adapt, it still remains at the margins. The adaptability of the method cannot be the problem. It has not become a mainstream practice though it takes a lot off the shoulders and hands of the social workers. Sundell & Vinnerljung & Rubyrn (2001) suggest that in complex situations of child protection, social workers' concern for their professional accountability may override the wish to utilize the potential benefits the FGC model. A more outspoken political commitment would have been needed to make a bigger change. If FGC was introduced primarily as a judicial approach and as a right it may have achieved a better outcome. I would suggest that it would make a difference if the task of a social worker is to fulfil a right to FGC rather than to have to assess the need or not for FGC.

As noticed earlier, good practices are not like articles that can be transferred from one place to another. In order to be sustainable, a good practice needs not only good work in the actual situation but also good management, viable relations between agencies/practitioners who are referring and receiving clients, good local networking in the civil society, etc. The route from scientific evidence to introducing practices is a course through landscapes of conflicting interests and multiple actors. The word "implementation" barely describes the political process through which an activity is made a general practice.

Local actors and their interests cannot be bypassed when transporting evidence-based good practices to a local context. Therefore, research that aims at developing practices should take part in local processes. If one acts close to instead of at a distance from, the issue of the universality of explanations changes. Instead of studying simplified causal relations, multifaceted settings are called for. Developing professional practices requires research that can feed local learning processes. If one wishes to transfer network dialogue practices from one context to another, there are no shortcuts. In the new contexts, *local negotiations, local networking and local learning processes* are required. Results from previous undertakings have an important role in supporting such processes. Insights and crystallisations do accumulate – but the end results of the learning processes in one context cannot be transplanted (See Seikkula & Arnkil 2006).

Helga Nowotny, Peter Scott and Michael Gibbons (2002) write that the striving for valid knowledge through purifying it from its contexts produces *less* valid knowledge than strongly contextualised research. They analyse science–society relations against a wide body of material from a variety of fields and contexts - from technical to social science fields. Their observations are not directly from psychosocial activities, but they certainly inspire reflection upon the challenges of research in this branch, too. Nowotny et al. (ibid., 117) argue that "(r)eliable knowledge, although it will remain a solid and indispensable criterion to strive for, will be tested not in the abstract, but in the very concrete and local circumstances. (…) The reliability of scientific knowledge needs to be complemented and strengthened by becoming also socially robust. Hence, context-sensitivity must be

heightened and its awareness must be spread. (…) One way to make science more context-sensitive is to bring in people."

It is urgent to develop *broader settings* for evidence-based research. The obvious challenge is to develop effectiveness studies that also recognise non-linear approaches, those of mutuality and responsiveness. Evidence-based research should come into the open, from institution-dominated settings to agoras and dialogues. It is important not to equate the search for scientific evidence and careful meta-analyses *only* with control studies that drastically reduce the phenomena under study and see only one-way causations (Seikkula & Arnkil 2006).

Based on this research, the situation still appears to be that FGC often has a role in initiating various changes from a child perspective; in making a difference; generally it is experienced positively by clients; and following up the changes over time usually brings to light unexpected processes. In societal and political practices – as child protection is - changes are not initiated only by research-based and highly valid knowledge, but through other motivations. The will to strengthen the rights of children and to empower them is needed.

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Vinnerljung, Bo & Franzén, Eva (2005) Foster children as young adults: many motherless, fatherless or orphans. A Swedish national cohort study. Vinnerljung, Bo & Öman, Maria & Gunnarson, Thomas (2005) Educational attainments of former child welfare clients - a Swedish national cohort study. International Journal of Social Welfare 2005:14:265–276.

Vuorio, Juha-Pekka (2008) Läheisneuvonpito ja lastensuojelu. An article in Juha-Pekka Vuorio & Erja Saurama & Salla Hänninen (Eds.) (2008) Verkostojen voimaa vai seittien satimia. Kokemuksia läheisneuvonpidosta. Pääkaupunkiseudun sosiaalialan osaamiskeskus SOCCAn ja Heikki Waris -instituutin julkaisusarja nro18, 2008: Yliopistopaino. Pp. 9–36.

Vuorio, Juha-Pekka & Saurama, Erja & Hänninen, Salla (Eds.) (2008) Verkostojen voimaa vai seittien satimia. Kokemuksia läheisneuvonpidosta. Pääkaupunkiseudun sosiaalialan osaamiskeskus SOCCAn ja Heikki Waris -instituutin julkaisusarja nro18, 2008: Yliopistopaino.

Appendix 1. Published Articles during by the project members the Project Time 2003–2007

Finland

Research

Heino, Tarja, Reinikainen, Sarianna & Bergman, Marina (eds.) (2003) Familjerådslag i Norden. Erfarenheter, forskningsresultat, reflektioner. Svenska social- och kommunalhögskolan vid Helsingfors universitet. SSKH Meddelanden 66. ('Family Group Conference in the Nordic countries. Experiences, research results, reflections'. The first research review for the project)

Reinikainen, Sarianna (2007) Läheisneuvonpito lapsinäkökulmasta. ('Family Group Conference from the Child's Perspective'). STAKES Reports 7/2007.

Articles in books and journals (referee)

Heino, Tarja (2003) Using Family Group Conferencing to Protect Children in Finland in A Professional Publication of American Humane, Volume 18, Numbers 1&2. Promising Results, Potential New Directions: International FGDM Research and Evaluation in Child Welfare.

Heino, Tarja & Kaatra, Anne & Korhonen, Liisa & Possauner, Monika & Vuorio, Juha-Pekka (2005) Läheisneuvonpidon ja sosiaalityön kriittinen kohta: lapsi. ('The critical point in family group conferencing and social work: the child') (279–303) In Mirja Satka & Synnove Karvinen-Niinikoski & Marianne Nylund & Susanna Hoikkala (eds.) Sosiaalityön käytäntötutkimus. Helsinki: Palmenia-kustannus.

Heino, Tarja (2005) Lapsen tieto – sen paikka tutkimuksessa ja käytännössä. ('The child's knowledge – its position in research and practice') In Sakari Hänninen & Jouko Karjalainen & Tuukka Lahti (eds.): Toinen tieto. Kirjoituksia huono-osaisuuden tunnistamisesta. Stakes.

Heino, Tarja (2006) Tiedon tuottamisen tilat läheisneuvonpitoprojektissa ('Spaces for knowledge production in the FGC project'). Article (p. 167–194) in Riitta Seppänen-Järvelä and Vappu Karjalainen (eds.) Kehittämistyön risteyksiä, Stakes.

Heino, Tarja: Knowledge Creating Process in Family Group Conference. In Liv E. Schjelderup & Cecilie Omre (eds.) Veivisere for et fremtidig barnevern. Familieråd og barn i moderne barnevern. Trondheim: Tapir Akademisk forlag, 2007.

Papers in conferences

Heino, Tarja (2003) Dialogues between helpers and families in worrying situations. Encountering families and children in child protection; what works. Plenum lecture in Taiwan, Taipei 19.–12.12. 2003: A Better World for Children. International Symposium of New Trends on Preventive Child Protective Service organized by (Auspice) Child Welfare Bureau, Ministry of The Interior, Taiwan, R.O.C., and by (Organizer) Child Welfare League Foundation, Taiwan, R.O.C. and by (Co-organizer) Department of Social Work at National Taiwan University.

Tarja Heino (2004): Family Group Conference from a Child Perspective. A Nordic Research Project. Plenum presentation in the 3th Nordic Conference on Family Group Conferencing, Helsinki.

Reinikainen, Sarianna (2004): Child perspective in FGC. Presentation in the 3th Nordic Conference on Family Group Conferencing, Helsinki.

Heino, Tarja & Reinikainen, Sarianna & Myllärniemi, Annina (2004) Child perspective in research on child protection. Family Group Conference as an example. Workshop. Socialt arbete och samhällsengagemang – diskurser och lokala praktiker. 20. Nordiska Socialhögskolekonferens 16.–18.8.2003. Forskningsinstitutet, SSKH Notat 1/2004. Svenska social- och kommunalhögskolan vid Helsingfors universitetet.

Reinikainen, Sarianna (2004) Presentation in the European Meeting on Family Group Conference in Holland.
Tarja Heino: Knowledge Creating Process in Family Group Conference. Plenum presentation in the 4th Nordic Conference on Family Group Conferencing, Stavanger, Norway 4.–5.5.2006.
Heino, Tarja & Reinikainen, Sarianna (2007) Läheisneuvonpito lapsinäkökulmasta. FGC from a Child Perspective. Workshop presentation in the Annual conference on Social Work Research and Practice 16.2.2007 in Rovaniemi.
Reinikainen, Sarianna (2007) Lasta ei aina kuulla tarpeeksi edes läheisneuvonpidossa. Dialogi 5/2007.
Reinikainen, Sarianna (2006) Läheisneuvonpito vahvistaa lapsen tukiverkostoa. Supliikki 1/2006.
Suomen Uusperheellisten Liitto ry.
Reinikainen, Sarianna (2004) The third Nordic conference on Family Group Conferencing.
NOPUSNYTT no. 4, 2004.
Heino, Tarja & Reinikainen, Sarianna (2004) Family Group Conferencing in the Nordic region from the child's perspective. NOPUSNYTT no. 4, 2004.

Other international presentations

Heino, Tarja (2003) Den nordiska projekten Familjerådslag. Worksop 31.8.2003 Nordiska Barnavårdakongress i Reykjavik 28.–31.8.2003, Island.
Heino, Tarja (2003) Dialogues between helpers and families in worrying situations. The Whole Day Workshop in Kaohsiung, Taiwan 22.12.2003.

Other national presentations and lectures

Sarianna Reinikainen:
Läheisneuvonpito lapsinäkökulmasta. Luento KOSKEn lastensuojelun kehittämisyksikön koulutustilaisuudessa 15.11.2007, Jyväskylässä
Lapsi läheisneuvonpidossa – näkökulmasta osalliseksi? Esitelmä Lapsen osallisuus lastensuojelussa -seminaarissa 14.9.2007, Helsingissä
Miten lapsi kuulee viranomaispuheen? Esitelmä Pääkaupunkiseudun lastensuojelupäivillä 6.9.2007, Helsingissä
Lapsen asema läheisneuvonpidossa. Esitelmä Nuoret lainrikkojat -seminaarissa 3.8.2007, Tampereella
Läheisneuvonpito. Luento Turun AMK:n koulutustilaisuudessa 1.3.2007, Turussa
Läheisneuvonpito lapsinäkökulmasta. Esitelmä Stakesin lapsi- ja lapsuustutkijoille 7.11.2006, Helsingissä
Ymmärtämisen etiikka tutkimuksessa "Läheisneuvonpito lapsinäkökulmasta". Esitelmä Nuorisotutkimuspäivillä 20.10.2006, Helsingissä
Family Group Conference from a Child Perspective. Esitelmä LNP:n Euroopan verkoston kokouksessa 13.10.2006, Kööpenhaminassa
Läheisneuvonpito lapsen näkökulmasta. Esitelmä Dialogistipäivillä, 8.9.2006, Helsingissä
Lapsinäkökulma läheisneuvonpidossa. Esitelmä Uusperheellisten liiton 10-vuotisjuhlaseminaarissa 10.3.2006, Turussa
Family Group Conference. Esitelmä saksalaisille lastensuojelualan työntekijöille Lastensuojelun keskusliitossa 18.11.2005, Helsingissä
Läheisneuvonpito Suomessa, lapsinäkökulma läheisneuvonpidossa. Esitelmä sosiaalityön lisensiaattiopiskelijoille Stakesissa 17.11.2005, Helsingissä
Lapsinäkökulma. Esitelmä käsitetyöpajassa Stakesissa 22.9.2005, Helsingissä
Lapsinäkökulma LNP-tutkimuksen empiirisessä aineistossa. Esitelmä valtakunnallisessa LNP-seminaarissa 6.10.2005, Helsingissä
Child perspective in the research on Family Group Conference. Esitelmä Kolmannessa pohjoismaisessa läheisneuvonpitokonferenssissa 27.8.2004, Helsingissä
Family Group Conference in Child Welfare. Esitelmä Pohjoismaisessa Sovittelu- ja konfliktinratkaisukonferenssissa 12.9.2004, Skövdessä

Tarja Heino:
about three in various seminars yearly, totally about 15.

Interviews

Läheisneuvonpidosta apua kouluongelmiin. Sarianna Reinikaisen haastattelu Opettaja-lehdessä 44–45/2006.
Läheisneuvonpito. Sarianna Reinikaisen haastattelu Ben Furmanin TV-ohjelmassa 17.11.2005.

Denmark

Research

Mortensen, Birgit (2007) Børneperspektivet i familierådslagning. Styrelsen for Specialrådgivning og Social Service. Odense. www.servicestyrelsen.dk

Articles in books and journals (referee)

Bo Morthorst Rasmussen: Vulnerability and Energy: The Study of the Danish Experiment with Family Group Conferencing in A Professional Publication of American Humane, Volume 18, Numbers 1&2. Promising Results, Potential New Directions: International FGDM Research and Evaluation in Child Welfare.
Mortensen, Birgit: Børneperspektivet i familierådslagning. I boken Liv E. Schjelderup & Cecilie Omre (red.) Veivisere for et fremtidig barnevern. Familieråd og barn i moderne barnevern. Trondheim: Tapir Akademisk forlag, 2007.

Papers in conferences

Faureholm, Jytte: Socio-Political Dilemmas in Relation to Family Group Conference. Plenum presentation in the 3th Nordic Conference on Family Group Conferencing, Helsinki
Lis Brønholt: Should FGC Be Adjusted to the Mainstream Practise or Should the Mainstream Practise be Adjusted to the FGC? Ideals and Realities. Plenum presentation in the 3th Nordic Conference on Family Group Conferencing, Helsinki
Birgit Mortensen: Plenum presentation in the 4th Nordic Conference on Family Group Conferencing, Stavanger
Mortensen, Birgit: Børneperspektivet i familierådslagning. Plenum presentation in the 4th Nordic Conference on Family Group Conferencing, Stavanger, Norway 4.–5.5.2006.

Other national presentations and lectures

Mortensen, Birgit (2007), Børneperspektivet i familierådslagning, conferences the 14th, 19th and 20th of Juny 2007 in Copenhagen, Aarhus and Odense. Public presentation of the research results.
Mortensen, Birgit (2007), "Inddragelse af familie og netværk – familierådslagning med barnets perspektiv". Presentation at the conference 'Familiepleje til etniske minoritetsbørn og -unge' (Foster Care for etnic Minoritychildren and Youth).

Iceland

Research

Árnadóttir, Hervör Alma (2006). Vill einhver hlusta á mig? Rannsókn á fjölskyldusamráði frá sjónarhorni barna. ('Does anyone want to listen to me? A study on family group conference from the child persepective'). Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands. [University of Iceland].

Freysteinsdóttir, Freydís Jóna & Árnadóttir, Hervör Alma (2007) Family group conferences: A report on Family group conference research which took place in Iceland, and is part of a Nordic research on the child perspective. January 12th, 2007.

Articles in books and journals (referee)

Árnadóttir, Hervör Alma (2007): Family Group Confernece in Reykjavik, Island. I boken Liv E. Schjelderup & Cecilie Omre (red.) Veivisere for et fremtidig barnevern. Familieråd og barn i moderne barnevern. Trondheim: Tapir Akademisk forlag, 2007

Papers in conferences

Freysteinsdóttir, Freydís Jona (2004). Fjölskyldusamráð. Auðnuspor, 45-47.

Árnadóttir, Hervör Alma (2006): Family Group Confernece in Reykjavik, Island. Plenum presentation in the 4th Nordic Conference on Family Group Conferencing, Stavanger, Norway 4.– 5.5.2006.

Norway

Research

Omre, Cecilie & Schjelderup, Liv (2008) Barn i barnevernet – En studie om barns deltagelse og styrkeprosesser i familieråd, Tapir Akademiske Forlag ('Children in Child Protection – A study of Children´s Participation and Processes of Strengths in Family Group Conferencing').

Articles in books and journals (referee)

Horverak, S, Omre, C. og Schjelderup, L. (2002) "Familierådslag – demokrati og beslutninger i norsk barnevern", Fagbokforlaget, Bergen.

Schjelderup, Liv & Omre, Cecilie & Marthinsen, Edgar (red.) (2005) Nye metoder i et moderne barnevern, Fagbokforlaget, Bergen.

Schjelderup, Liv & Omre, Cecilie (2005) Mot et nytt barnevern i boken Schjelderup, Liv & Omre, Cecilie & Marthinsen, Edgar (red.) (2005) Nye metoder i et moderne barnevern, Fagbokforlaget, Bergen. s. 9–46.

Schjelderup, Liv & Omre, Cecilie (2005) Familieråd – en ny modell for beslutninger i barnevernet i boken Schjelderup, Liv & Omre, Cecilie & Marthinsen, Edgar (red.) (2005) Nye metoder i et moderne barnevern, Fagbokforlaget, Bergen.s. 52–71.

Schjelderup, Liv & Omre, Cecilie (2005) Mot en anstendig praksis i barneverntjenesten i boken Schjelderup, Liv & Omre, Cecilie & Marthinsen, Edgar (red.) (2005) Nye metoder i et moderne barnevern, Fagbokforlaget, Bergen. s 268–277.

Omre, Cecilie & Schjelderup, Liv & Østerhaug, R. (red.) (2005) Fasetter fra sosialt arbeid", Tapir Akademiske Forlag.

Schjelderup, Liv & Omre, Cecilie (2005) Et Essay om Kunnskapsproduksjon og Kunnskapsdebatter i sosialt arbeid. I boken Omre, Cecilie & Schjelderup, Liv & Østerhaug, R. (red.) (2005) Fasetter fra sosialt arbeid", Tapir Akademiske Forlag.

Omre, Cecile & Schjelderup, Liv (2005) Barn i voldsrammede familier. I boken Omre, Cecilie & Schjelderup, Liv & Østerhaug, R. (red.) (2005) Fasetter fra sosialt arbeid", Tapir Akademiske Forlag.
Omre, C. & Schjelderup, L. (2006), Sosialt arbeid mellom vitenskap og laug, Nordisk Sosialt Arbeid, nr 4.
Schjelderup & Omre (red) (2007) , "Veivisere for moderne barnevern", Tapir akademiskeForlag, Trondheim.
Schjelderup, Liv (2007) Veivisere i et fremtidtig barnevern. I boken Schjelderup & Omre (red) Veivisere for moderne barnevern, Tapir akademiske Forlag.
Johansson, I-M, Brønholt, L., Horverak, S. Omre, C. & Schjelderup, L ,(2008) "Empowerment and globalisation in a Nordic social work education context", International Journal of Social Welfare.

Papers in conferences

Schjelderup Liv & Omre, Cecilie (2004) Welcome to the real world. CCCP-Conference, Building partnership for better practice, Research and Education, Universitetet i Stavanger.
Omre, Cecilie & Schjelderup Liv (2004) Family Group Conferencing in Today's Australia – What Can we learn of it in the Nordic Countries? Plenum presentation in the 3th Nordic Conference on Family Group Conferencing, Helsinki.
Schjelderup Liv & Omre, Cecilie , 2004, "Norwegian Child Welfare – frames and fringes – issues and challenges", "The welfare of the child - Conference", University of Western Australia.
Omre, Cecilie & Schjelderup Liv 2005 "Et åpnere barnevern", Den 21. Nordiske Social Højskole Konference, København, Danmark.
McKenzie, M., Omre. C., Schjelderup, L., Shannon, P., Walker, S. & Young, S., 2006, "Using community development, capacity building and strength-based strategies in child protection policy and practice: a comparative international study" , Nettpublisering:, IASSW, World Conference, Santiago, Chile.
McKenzie, M., Omre. C., Schjelderup, L., Shannon, P., Walker, S. & Young, S., 2007,
"Child Protection and Community Development: some challenges and opportunitie" , Nettpublisering:, IACD, Conference on Community Development, City University of Hong Kong,

NORDPLUS Master modules 2003–2008

Developed 3 x 10 ects. Joint Nordic Mastermodulers (University of Helsinki, University of Gothenburg, Bodø University College, CVU-Vest, University College,Denmark, University of Stavanger)
"Strength based perspectives in child welfare"
"Empowerment and families power to decide in child protection"
"Children, youth and participation"

EUSW, European Platform for Worldwide Social Work 2007–2008

Developed 60 ects International Joint Master-degree, "International Master´s Degree in Family Related Social Work". (Universite della Calabria, Universita degli Studi di Parma, Italia, Gøteborg Universitet, Universidad de les Illes Balderas, Spania, Bodø University College and University of Stavanger.

In printing process

McKenzie, M., Omre. C., Schjelderup, L., Shannon, P., Walker, S. & Young, S.(2008) "Policy and Pracice challenges in incorporating community in child protection" , Critical Social Policy.

Other international presentations

Schjelderup, L & Omre , C; about three seminars yearly

Other national presentations and lectures

Schjelderup, L & Omre, C; about five seminars yearly

Sweden

Research

Åkerlund, Eva-Marie (2006) Barn och familjerådslag. Barns syn på sin delaktighet i socialtjänsten. FoU-Södertörn.

Articles in books and journals (referee)

Erkers, M. & Nyberg, E. (red.) 2001 Familjerådslag i Norden. Erfarenheter från fält och forskning. FoU-Södertörn Skriftserie nr 15/01. (Historical starting point for the project).

Erkers, M. & Nyberg, E. 2003 Familjerådslag. Litteratur, forskning och praktik. FoU-Södertörn Skriftserie nr 31/03.

Hagman, J. & Nyberg, E. 2005 Mer makt åt folket!? En utvärdering av föräldrarådslag i Botkyrka kommun. FoU-Södertörn Skriftserie nr 48/05.

Nyberg, Eva: Family Group Conferencing in Sweden in A Professional Publication of American Humane, Volume 18, Numbers 1&2. Promising Results, Potential New Directions: International FGDM Research and Evaluation in Child Welfare. (p. 119–120).

Nyberg, Eva (2006) The Nordic research on family group conference. Research Paper.

Nyberg, Eva: To study the FGC process – in an collaborative design. I boken Liv E. Schjelderup & Cecilie Omre (red.) Veivisere for et fremtidig barnevern. Familieråd og barn i moderne barnevern. Trondheim: Tapir Akademisk forlag, 2007.

Papers in conferences

Näslund, Ewa: From a Method among Others to a New Paradigm in Social Work? – A Personal View of Ten Years Experience in Using Family Group Conference to Build Partnership between Professionals and Family Networks. Plenum presentation in the 3th Nordic Conference on Family Group Conferencing, Helsinki.

Nyberg, Eva & Patric Plenum presentation in the 4th Nordic Conference on Family Group Conferencing, Stavanger, Norway 4.–5.5.2006. Coming to be published on the web-pages and in the conference book (Tapir).

Näslund Ewa: presentation and partipating the panel in the international Conference on Family Group Conferencing in Wellington, New Zeeland in November 2006.

Nyberg, Eva:

6–8/12 2006 National conference in Allmänna Barnhuset: Vård utom hemmet – aktuell forskning och FoU:s roll. Seminar: Alternativ till placering av barn och ungdom – aktuella FoU-projekt.

18–19/9 2006 Arrangement FoU-Södertörn – Allmänna Barnhuset, Sweden: Barnperspektivet och barnets perspektiv i familjerådslagsarbete – en fördjupning. A national conference.

6–8/9 2006 Nätverket FoU välfärd, årliga studiedagar, Ronneby. The network FoU (D & R) welfare, annual conference. Seminar: To study multi-faceted work – the evaluation reality for a Development and Research Unit – with Family Group Conference as an example.

4–6/7 2006 Childhood and Youth: choice and participation. International conference. University of Sheffield: Centre for the study of childhood and youth. Seminar: My FGC – childrens´ reflections over decision making in the FGC context.

4–5/5 2006 Nordiska Familjerådslagskonferensen IV, Stavanger. Plenum: To study the FGC-process – in a collaborative design.
9–11/2 2006 Nordiskt FORSA symposium, Helsingfors. Seminar: To evaluate multi-faceted activities in social work – with FGC as an example.
16–18/9 2004 1st International Conference on Community Psychology, Berlin. Seminar: Child perspective and participation – two concepts with complications in practice and in research.
27–28/8 2004 3rd Nordic Family Group Conference, Helsingfors.
Seminar: Parent Group Conference for children who commit crimes together – with FGC as a model (with Hagman, J, & Eriksson, P.).
24–26/9 2003 Annual conference for Swedish directors in social welfare, Botkyrka. Seminar: A presentation of Family Group Conference in social work – practice and research (Erkers, M. & Nyberg, E.).

Eva-Marie Åkerlund:
18–19/9 2006 18–19/9 2006 Arrangement FoU-Södertörn – Allmänna Barnhuset, Sweden: Barnperspektivet och barnets perspektiv i familjerådslagsarbete – en fördjupning. A national conference. Seminar: En intervjuundersökning av barn och ungdomar om deras syn på sin familjerådslagsprocess.

In printing process

Sternudd, Å. & Lagerman, S. 2008 Familjerådslag vid bostadsproblem. FoU-Södertörn Skriftserie nr XX/08 (Quided by FoU research director Eva Nyberg).

Other national presentations and lectures

Nyberg, Eva:
Institution for Social Work, Stockholms university 2002 – 2004: FGC – for children and youth at risk. Lecture in the course Children at risk, within the regular education of social workers. Recurring lecture every term.
FGC – a part of an inquiry with special participation for the client. A Nordic project.
Lecture for visitors (central and local politicians, employees from pedagogic world, institutional world, heath world etc) from Minsk, Murmansk, Belgrad etc. within the projects for Eastern Europe, the International Department, Institution for Social Work, Stockholm. 2003–2004, recurring.
2003, 6 days: Teaching about FGC in the new Institute for Social Work in Banja Luka, former Jugoslavia, project of the International Department, Institution for Social Work, Stockholms university.

See also

http://info.stakes.fi/laheisneuvonpito/SV/index.htm
http://info.stakes.fi/laheisneuvonpito/EN/index.htm
http://info.stakes.fi/laheisneuvonpito/FI/index.htm
Den tredje Nordiska FRS- Konferensen i Helsingfors 27.–28.8.2004 Helsinki. Stakes.

Appendix 2. Realisation of the National Researches

Country	Financiers	Responsible organisation	Money granted	Time reserved	Researcher (empiria)	Senior researcher
Denmark	Ministry of social affairs/ National board	UFC-Boern og Unge / Aabenraa	478 000 Dkk	2004–2005 (to be applied 2006)	Birgit Mortensen	Jytte Hansen (since 2005)
Finland	STAKES	STAKES and Heikki Waris-institute	20 000 - 30 000 € /year	2004–2006	Sarianna Reinikainen	Tarja Heino
Iceland	University of Reykjavik and Reykjavik city	University of Reykjavik and Reykjavik	30 000 IK; incl. in the professor's work;	2006–2008	Freydís Freysteins-dóttir and Hervór Alma Árnadóttir	Freydís Freysteins-dóttir
Norway	Ministry of Affairs on Family and Children	University of Stavanger	400 000 Nok	2004–2007	Liv Schjelderup and Cecilie Omre	Liv Schjelderup and Cecilie Omre
Sweden	Allmänna barnhuset and FoU-Södertörn	FoU-Södertörn	250 000 Sek	Sep. 2004–Sep. 2005	Eva-Marie Åkerlund	Eva Nyberg

Appendix 3. Brief history of the research project

What was planned – and what happened

The draft or preliminary research plan was attached to the application for The Nordic Council of Ministers already in the autumn 2003. The Nordic research was planned to be based on case analyses with two years' follow up and on comparative dialogues in several levels. We aimed to start the research in each country in 2004. While discussing the Nordic research setting, the national preparations were lively ongoing. In each country applications were sent for sent to several national funding bodies to get the research financed and to get it started. Each national group aimed to get further in organising the practical arrangements and to be able to employ the researchers.

The first meeting was arranged in March 2004. That was a kind of transmission period. Some of the group members have been working together already for more than two years; some were withdrawing at this phase; some we attending for the first time – and both the group and the theme was new for newcomers. The purpose was to find a common, shared orientation so that the draft of the research plan could be planned to form the final realised version. That was very interesting meeting.

The constancy of the group has been important, but also the changes had brought in light some significant phenomena. The plan had been discussed among the persons who have been collecting the research results and experiences for the first phase. This group has had several discussions on the research methods and on measuring effects. The group had taken the orientation of the research setting and didn't question it any more. But, the newcomers had questions in mind. They had also courage enough to put the questions and to claim for answers and grounds for the choices made.

This process was very fruitful; it made us to explicit our choices. I wrote all discussions on line into my laptop, as accurately werbatim as possible. As a matter of fact, that discussion on measuring and comparing results hit the point – and hurt a bit. At that time, the Nordic Campbell Collaboration had just been grounded, and the keen discussion about effective social work and effective methods in social work was ongoing.

During the first half year we discussed, problematised and concretised the Nordic plan parallel to the local national plans, processes, tact and schedule. It was important to try to fit national situation and needs to the negotiated, shared Nordic research core. This meant several dialogues among the group members – both face-to-face and by e-mail, some of us actively, some more like withdrawing. The active phases made up a lively exchange of opinions. The exchange of views on sample criteria, use of methods to interview children etc continued to the second

meeting. The way of combining qualitative data with scores given by children was discussed; totally open interview vs. half structured was in the topic.

We decided to test and examine a new method (Recalling the future; presented later) for interviewing the children. The method is invented at Stakes by Tom Arnkil and Esa Eriksson. Jukka Pyhäjoki from their group educated us, gave a presentation with practise exercise to use the method. The Swedish researcher was not present this education, but the two other took the task to educate and discuss the use of the method between themselves. We worked out a hand book presenting the principles and procedures to make it easier for the researchers to use the method more or less by the same way in each country.

The second meeting in 2004 was held in Helsinki in connection with the third Nordic symposium on FGC in August. After completing our discussions we could present the Nordic plan for research there. We had also a possibility to get comments and to reflect with other practise and research colleagues. (The third… 2004)

By autumn 2004 a common Nordic and national research plans have been completed. The Nordic research consists of the common part (the core) and the national completing parts.

By autumn 2004 various practical prerequisites have been settled and organised. They were actually quite many and different by nature:

- common data collection instruments have been drafted and developed (interview frames, questionnaires, observation scheme)
- practical questions concerning data collection have been resolved (researchers' work in the field, timetables, Nordic co-ordination)
- research permission for the Nordic research was received
- research permissions have been arranged in each country
- common back ground material attached to the national research permission applications were produced (f.ex. brochures for the children and for the family members about the project; consent documents for children and for the parents; secrecy agreements for the researchers).

In Autumn we had a really active phase: no more meetings but over 30 e-mail messages in September – October. Although we had decided on the structure of various interviews, the discussion continued on two topics. First, timing of the third interview – whether to have it before the follow-up meeting or after that. Secondly, the question of observations of the private phase of the FGC arouse; to observe or not to observe?

The Islanders had not have any FGCs ever – so they had to begin with importing the method and arranging seminar and courses on it. The Swedish colleagues (Mats Erkers and Ewa Näslund from the Nordic project) helped with educating the social workers and co-ordinators.

In the end of the year 2004 Denmark got the first child interviewed and the first FGC observed. Also the first families in Finland and in Sweden had given the consent to the research. This showed that *we are totally dependent on what happens in practise*. We can't hurry up anything more. It is about the FGC-cases to become active; about social workers to present the idea for the family; about if there are children of age 7–17 years; and about them and their families to say yes to participating the research. For these practise reasons we tried not to decrease the number of children included but we had to shorten the follow up time from two years to one year only. The research material consisted of children's interviews (four times by the same researcher) during the follow-up time.

Though there were not so many research cases started as we had anticipated, we were active in another ways. We presented the project in the NOPUSNytt theme number 4/2004: The Nordic presentation plus national contributions. European cooperation continued also. In addition, we were invited to join the network on the Nordic Mediation led by Dag Hareide. He interviewed us in Finland for the book he was editing on methods used in mediation and conflict management. The article was published, and a presentation in their seminar given.[1]

During the first research year, research groups have been established and research localities and collaborative partners negotiated. We got a kind of structure of two-three circles, both Nordic and nationally. On the Nordic level we had group of practise researchers (5), the research group (10; incl. senior researchers) and a larger reference group (13–15; incl. local practise or project people). Nationally the researchers had various project groups or support groups.

The year 2005 was both difficult and productive. The motivation and expectations were high, but the national resources low. In Denmark the researcher could work only 9 hours per week for this research; in Sweden there were periods with no funding; in Island nothing to pay for the researcher; in Finland the researcher worked part time (60 %); in Norway they managed to arrange time for the research also as aside of the university work.

During 2005 we had the first meeting in February. Those (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) who had got experiences from interviewing the children and observing the FGCs had ideas and concrete questions arisen concerning data gathering, organising it and analysing it. It was time to discuss about analysing cases and how to make sure it is done enough the same way. The Danish got a role as a pioneer, being the first in proceeding – also reflective discussions were possible between Denmark and Finland.

The February meeting was full of items to discuss. It was a successful meeting with a larger circle of participants from the FGC-practise partners. Group members made the notes; the leader couldn't be present because of a sudden accident. Anyhow, she took part in the meeting via notes and messages.

1 www.n-f-m.org

The very keen discussion continued in the other meeting in May. The memos took nine pages! Anyhow, the differences in timing in the national processes were visible. Other had practise questions, other took part in the discussions more in an abstract level. The need to get deeper in the empirical data and the urge to get a bit distance to the abstract pondering we decided to have an extra meeting in October, just between those researchers who already have got data from FGCs and interviews. The aim was to enrich discussions and reflections between those who are proceeding in empirical research at the same phase.

During 2006 every country had proceeded empirically. We had only one meeting, in Norway, just before the fourth Nordic FGC Conference in Stavanger. The Nordic research project was well visible and presented there. Each country gave either a plenum presentation or a workshop there, telling about the first results. (See Schjelderup & Omre (eds. 2007).)

By the end of the year the Swedish report by Eva-Marie Åkerlund was ready. Alma Árnadóttir from Island got her research report accepted as a part of her masters degree. Denmark and Finland had the draft for manuscript ready. Norway was on the road.

The project (represented by Tarja Heino and Ewa Näslund) took part in the international conference on FGC in November in New Zealand. The exchange of research findings and methodological approaches were interesting: many of the differences both in research and in FGC applications became visible; Nordic specialities were to be seen.

Appendix 4. Data security – participants' privacy protection

(from the paper written for an ethical board)

Children's interviews will be arranged according to the child's and her/his parents' wishes either at the child's home or in some other place appropriate for an interview. In interviews with the researcher, only the child is present, possibly with (and with the consent of the child and her/his parents) the person that will help the child in the Family Group Conference. The interview will be tape recorded by the interviewer and written notes will also be made on paper.

Children will be observed during the information-giving phase and the presentation of the plan phase and possibly during the private network meeting too. Observation notes will be recorded on paper.

All research data produced and gathered (in Finland) – interview recordings, written notes of interviews and observations, documents – will be retained (at STAKES) in an appropriately locked place to which no other persons except the research personnel will have access. Each child and Family Group Conference will be given an identifying number that is used in all written documents and that allows linkages between the different forms of data for a case. Names or other identifying information will be removed. In the documents that are produced in the process of the Family Group Conference, identifiable personal data will be replaced by an identifying number before filing. Interview recordings will be destroyed after the project has ended. All the personnel participating in handling the data (interviewers/researchers, transcribers, research supervisors) will sign a secrecy agreement that will be filed by the research leader. When reporting the research, special care will be taken to not allow any person concerned to be identified from case descriptions or the presentation of the results. After the research is completed, the research data will be filed in (STAKES') archives for possible later use.

The research permission is based on participants' consent. Data collection in each child's case starts in the following way. After an agreement on arranging Family Group Conference has been made, the leader of the Co-ordinator Bank (in Finland! Change according to your practice) tells the child and the parents about the research and gives them a brochure of the research (see attachments). If the family decides, after consideration, to participate in the research, both the child and the parents sign a consent form made for this purpose (see attachments). The researcher/interviewer then receives the contact information (names, telephone number, address) of the family from the leader of the Co-ordinator Bank (in Finland! Change according to your practice). The researcher/interviewer discusses the research both with the child and the parents and sets with them the time and place of the first interview.

In Family Group Conferences that are observed (when a family has given consent to observation), the researcher verbally introduces the research to the private network at the beginning of the meeting and explains the purpose of their presence. If all the participants again give their oral consent, the researcher stays to observe the meeting. This consent is recorded in the minutes of the meeting.

Appendix 5. Brochure to the family (in Finland)

A research on Family Group Conference has started in 2004, and we hope that your family, especially your child, can participate in it. In this brochure we shortly describe what the research is about.

Family Group Conference from a Child Perspective

Nordic follow-up study / STAKES and the Co-ordinator Bank of the Capital Area

Many studies have been carried out on Family Group Conference, but the focus has not been expressly in the children's experiences in any of them. In this Nordic research project the purpose is to look Family Group Conference from a child perspective and explore **the child's experiences on Family Group Conference and its effects**. The research is carried out in all Nordic countries, in co-operation between one research institute and one agency that organises Family Group Conference in each country. In Finland those partners in research are STAKES (The National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health) and The Co-ordinator Bank of the Capital Area situating at Heikki Waris -institute. All the 7–17-year-old children and their families that participate in a Family Group Conference during fall 2004 are asked to participate in the research.

The research questions are, how the child experiences her/his situation before Family Group Conference, how (s)he experiences Family Group Conference as a meeting and as a process and how (s)he experiences the changes following Family Group Conference in her/his life. To answer to these questions, the data is gathered by interviewing children, by being present/observing in the 'information giving' phase and the 'presentation of the plan' phase of Family Group Conference (though in no way participating in the conversation) and by getting acquainted with/analysing the documents that are produced in the process.

A consent to participation in the research is asked separately from the guardians and the child. If the child and the guardians have given their consent to the researcher's presence in Family Group Conference, (s)he comes to the meeting and, right in the beginning, introduces the research and tells about the purpose of her/his presence to all participating the meeting. (S)he stays present only if all participants give their consent to it.

For the research we would thus like to:

1 **interview** your child four times altogether: 1) before Family Group Conference, 2) after Family Group Conference, 3) after the follow-up meeting and 4) two years after Family Group Conference. The content of the interviews, briefly described, is following. In the first interview the child is asked to describe her/his worries at the moment as well as hopes for the future and what her/his expectations are for Family Group Conference. In the second interview the child is asked her/his experiences on Family Group Conference. In the third interview the child is asked her/his experiences on the follow-up meeting and on the changes in her/his situation during that relatively short period of time after Family Group Conference. In the fourth interview the child is asked her/his experiences on the changes in her/his life during a longer period (two years) of time after Family Group Conference. The first interview may help the child to prepare her/himself for Family Group Conference, and in all interviews (s)he gets a chance to bring forth things that are important to her/him.
2 **be present in Family Group Conference** to follow how the meeting proceeds and how the child participates in it. By those observations the researcher gets a general idea of the meeting's progress and atmosphere, which helps her/him when interviewing the child.
3 **get acquainted with/analyse the documents that are produced in the process of Family Group Conference** and assess through them the process' effects on the child's situation. Those documents are the agreement of/assignment for arranging Family Group Conference, the written questions for FGC to resolve, the professionals' written information/summaries, the plan that is produced in FGC and the similar documents of the follow-up meeting(s).

So, in the research we are interested particularly in the child and her/his experiences. That is why all the children's different ideas and opinions are of great importance, and they increase our knowledge of Family Group Conferences effects on the child's life. The central goal of the research is to get such knowledge and understanding that helps in developing the Family Group Conference method to better support the child and the family.

All the information that we get through interviews, observations and documents are handled absolutely **confidentially**. Only the interviewer/researcher gets to know the identity of the child and her/his family members, and (s)he, as well as other personnel participating in the research, comply with professional secrecy. The results of the research will be reported so that none of the parties concerned can be identified in the report.

Participation in the research is voluntary. Your family (you and your child) has a right to interrupt participation in the research at any time. Participation or interruption of it does not have any effect on your child's or your family's position in future Family Group Conferences, in other procedures organised by child welfare or in services allowed by child welfare. The researcher/s willingly answer to all the questions you may have concerning the research during and after it.

Researcher x.x. tel. xxx.
STAKES

The research leader x.x. tel. xxx.
STAKES

Appendix 6. Brochure to the child (in Finland)

TO THE CHILD THAT PARTICIPATES IN FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE

Soon your family is going to participate in a family group conference. The purpose of the family group conference is to help you and your family in those matters that are not satisfactory at the moment.

We would like to ask you to participate in some Nordic research that began in 2004. All the Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland) are exploring what children think of family group conference and what happens in children's life following family group conference. This research involves the researchers discussing with the children while sometimes also being present at the family group conferences.

If you choose to participate in the research, a researcher will come to meet you at home briefly a little before the family group conference. Then the purpose is to talk about the things that are important to you in life, and also about the things you wish to see changed. The second visit by the researcher takes place soon after the family group conference. At that time your experiences of family group conference are discussed. Later the researcher comes to meet you a couple of times again, and then you will discuss the events following family group conference and how things are for you at the moment. The discussions are one-to-one and absolutely confidential, which means the researcher will not discuss anything you say about your family members or to anyone else either.

It is very important to hear about children's experiences and thoughts about their own life and about family group conference. With that knowledge adults can try to improve family group conference and other ways of helping. That is why we hope that you too can participate in this research. Only you can say how you feel about things and about how things appear to you.

Participation in the research is voluntary, and you can at any time interrupt your participation if you wish. If you and your parents decide that you would like to participate in the research, the researcher will call you at home and arrange a first meeting. If you want to ask questions and discuss the research before the meeting, you can phone and talk directly to the researcher

Appendix 7. Consent (Child)

Family Group Conference from a Child's Perspective

Nordic follow-up study / STAKES and the Co-ordinator Bank of the Capital Area

I give my consent to participate in the research.

___ I give my consent to **interviews with me** 1) before the Family Group Conference, 2) after the Family Group Conference, 3) after the follow-up meeting and 4) two years after the Family Group Conference.

___ I give my consent for **a researcher to be present** in the Family Group Conference that is to be arranged for my case. A researcher can be present
- ___ in the information-giving phase and in the presentation of the plan phase
- ___ in the family network's private meeting

___ I give my consent for **the use of documents** that are produced in the process of Family Group Conference (the agreement of/assignment for arranging Family Group Conference, the written questions for Family Group Conference to resolve, the professionals' written information/summaries, the plan that is produced in the Family Group Conference and the similar documents of the follow-up meeting(s)).

___ I give my consent for the use of the data and information gathered and produced in this research to be used in future research on the same subject.

While giving the above consent, I am aware of the purpose of the research and its advantages and disadvantages. I have carefully read the brochure that introduces the research, and I have had an opportunity should I wish it to discuss my concerns with the researcher. I give my consent voluntarily, and I understand that I can cancel it at any time by notifying the researcher.

_____	_____
Time and place	Child
_____	_____
Time and place	Receiver of this consent

Appendix 8. Consent (Parent/s)

Family Group Conference from a Child's Perspective

Nordic follow-up study / STAKES and the Co-ordinator Bank of the Capital Area

I give my consent for my child to participate in the research.

___ I give my consent to **interviews with my child** 1) before the Family Group Conference, 2) after the Family Group Conference, 3) after the follow-up meeting and 4) two years after the Family Group Conference.

___ I give my consent for **a researcher to be present** in the Family Group Conference that is to be arranged for my child's case. A researcher may be present
- ___ in the information-giving phase and in the presentation of the plan phase
- ___ in the family network's private meeting

___ I give my consent for **the use of documents** that are produced in the process of Family Group Conference (the agreement of arranging Family Group Conference, the written questions for Family Group Conference to resolve, the professionals' written summaries, the plan that is produced in the Family Group Conference and the similar documents of the follow-up meeting(s)).

___ I give my consent for the use of the data and information gathered and produced in this research to be used in future research on the same subject.

In giving consent, I am aware of the purpose of the research and its advantages and disadvantages. I have carefully read the brochure that introduces the research, and I have had an opportunity should I wish it to discuss my concerns with the researcher. I give my consent voluntarily, and I understand that I can cancel it at any time by notifying the researcher.

_____	_____
Time and place	Parent (guardian)
_____	_____
Time and place	Parent (guardian)
_____	_____
Time and place	Receiver of this consent

Appendix 9. Interview Frames

(These frames are not edited by Mark Phillips; they are just working papers in the project)

Child Interview Nr 1 (within a week before fgc, by the end of the preparation phase)

1) INTRODUCTION

Child_____ Age____ Interview date_____
Place_____

Social worker's first name _____
Co-ordinator's first name _____

The interviewer has got acquainted with the agreement of arranging Family Group Conference _____ / the questions settled for the FGC to be resolved _____ / the social worker's summary _____ before the interview.

Mood at the moment
[Very low 1 2 3 4 5 Very high] Why?

General wellbeing
[Very bad 1 2 3 4 5 Very good] Why?

2) THE CHILD'S SITUATION

1. A year has passed, – so we will be in the autumn 2005 – and things are well now. Tell me, how they are for you now?

Tables by Birgit Mortensen

Purpose	The interviewer	Practical issues
To get a description of the good (future) situation, as if we were there now.	All the time ask concretely, to give me clear descriptions of the good situation and the processes, which have led to it.	Remember to speak in present. Paper and pens. Each dimension is written in its own cardboard paper
Make dimensions	The things mentioned by the children, are named together with the child (as close to the child's own words as possible) – for dimensions	Repeat the child's words to make sure what (s)he says and to give her/him possibility to correct/focus her/his meaning better
Give scores to the dimensions	Where on the scale are you in the good situation? (if possible – ask more about how it is there, and why he/she puts the score exactly there) Continue, until there is no more dimensions	Mark on the line (just in the "now" line)
To get the dimensions ranked	What is the most important thing for you (of the dimensions)	Ultimately the child is asked to put the most important dimension (on its paper) on the top (on the table). Remember to write down the ranking, if it is later changed by the child.

2. **How did you get here? What did you do to bring about this positive development – and who helped you and how?**

purpose	The interviewer	Practical issues
To get a description of the way and resources available to get into the good situation described above (acts, doings)	Who helped you (to come here)	Get them mentioned, ask- if some logically important persons are missing (parents, teacher etc…?.)
	How did they help you – concretely. What did mother do, father, the teacher, the social worker etc.	(Don't write on papers – just tape it.)
Also the part of the child him/herself – (empowerment)	What did you do yourself, to make things get better? (here you could add, and what could you be proud of…)	

3. What made you worried earlier – before the fgc? What lessened your worries?

purpose	The interviewer	Practical issues
To identify the worries of the child, as they were then (meaning now)	What were you worried about before?	
	Keep on, until there are no more worries.	
	See, if there is consistency between the worries and the dimensions. If not, write new ones on new pieces of paper	"new worries" can have a different colour paper
	What made your worries lessening? (this could have come out before, but it may complement from worry-perspective and be a control-question)	
To give scores to the dimensions from before (seen from "then" – meaning now)	Where on the scale were you before?	Mark it on the line – remember to use the "before-line"
Eventually – check the ranks..	Was it also this dimension, that were most important back then?	Then you can change the ranks – if the child does – remember to note the changes down.

3) EXPERIENCES OF THE PREPARATION PHASE OF FGC

Open start with the child …

For example: "Now you and your family have agreed to participate in a Family Group Conference. Would you tell me about the situation and the process that led to this agreement? (This opening in the child's language, though)

Then further questions following the child's account – what (s)he wants to talk about concerning the family's path to a FGC and her/his observations and experiences concerning the preparation phase.

After the child's own account, or if (s)he doesn't feel like telling about things on her/his own terms in the first place, the interviewer may proceed with help of the questions below.

1. What do you think an FGC is - what do you know about it? When did you hear about it for the first time? With whom have you talked about it?

2. Why do you think this FGC is now being arranged? How was it decided to arrange a FGC? How did you feel about it?

3. What do you think about the questions that are addressed to your FGC to be resolved? (The questions are at hand.) Are they the right ones from your point of you? How right?
   [Not right at all 1 2 3 4 5 Exactly right]

4. Who made the questions? Did you participate in making them? How did you participate? How much?
   [Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much]

5. How was decided if you are present in the conference? How do you feel about it?

6. Do you have a helper? How was (s)he chosen and by whom? Who is (s)he? Why did you (or somebody else) want just her/him? What do you think about having a helper in general and this person as your helper? How has your helper helped you this far? What expectations do you have for her/him (her/his help) in the meeting and in the future?

7. Who chose the persons to be invited to your FGC? How (why) did you (or somebody else) choose those persons? Did you have any special wishes/ suggestions concerning any persons to be invited or not? What expectations do you have concerning their participation?

8. What do you think and feel about the soon coming FGC at the moment? What are your expectations concerning it?

9. What has happened lately, during the time since your family agreed to have a FGC until now? Has anything new or surprising happened? Has your situation changed in any way? How?

10. What are your expectations concerning the results of the FGC? Do you believe that the FGC can change your situation for better? How much do you believe that the FGC can change your situation ?
[Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much]

11. How do you feel about participating in the forthcoming meeting (FGC)?
[I feel very reluctant/opposed. 1 2 3 4 5 I'm very much looking forward to it.]

12. What do you think about your participation during the preparation phase? Have you been able to participate as much as you have wanted? How much have you been involved in the preparation?
[Very little 1 2 3 4 5 Very much]

What do you think about that (good or bad to be involved)?

3) FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE

4. What is an FGC – what do you know about it? With whom have you talked about it?

5. What is in your opinion, why is FGC going to be arranged?

6. What do you think of the questions that are addressed to your FGC to be resolved? (The questions are at hand.) Are they the right ones from your point of you? How right?
[Not right at all 1 2 3 4 5 Exactly right]

7. Did you participate in making the questions? How did you participate? How much?
[Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much]

8. How was decided if you are present in the conference? How did you feel about it?

9. How was decided who was to be your helper? How did you think about it?

10. How was decided about which relatives, friends and professionals were to be invited? What did you think about it?

11. What do you think about FGC being now arranged in your/your family's situation? What are your thoughts and expectations concerning FGC as an event and as a solver of the situation?

12. What has happened after an agreement of arranging FGC was made? Has your situation changed? How?

13. Do you believe that FGC can change the situation? How much do you believe that the FGC could change the situation?
[Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much]

4) PARTICIPATION

15. How do you feel about participating in the forthcoming meeting (FGC)?
[I feel very reluctant. 1 2 3 4 5 I'm very much looking forward to it.]

16. What do you think about being able or being obliged to participate in planning and decision making in FGC?

17. Do you have any suggestions on how to increase the child's/young person's possibilities of participating?

18. Do you have any suggestions on how difficult situations (like you had) should be resolved?

5) WELL-BEING IN GENERAL

20. How are you now (wellbeing at the moment in general)?
[Very bad 1 2 3 4 5 Very fine]

21. How do you feel about this interview? Was there something you would have liked to say and I didn't ask?

6) ENDING

13. Do you have any suggestions on how difficult situations (like you had) should be resolved?

14. What do you think about the FGC-process this far (good things, bad things, wishes, suggestions)?

15. What do you think about this interview? What do you think about participating in this research?

Mood at the moment

[Very low 1 2 3 4 5 Very high] Why?

* * * * *

Child interview 2 (within a week after Family Group Conference)

Child _____ Date _____
Place _____

Social worker's first name _____
Co-ordinator's first name _____

The interviewer _____ observed / didn't observe _____ Family Group Conference.

If the interviewer observed, she did it only _____ in the 1st and 3rd phases / all the time _____.

The interviewer has got acquainted with the plan made in Family Group Conference before the interview _____.

1) Beginning

Mood at the moment

[Very low 1 2 3 4 5 Very high] Why?

General wellbeing (a wide concept that includes the child's view of her/his physical, cognitive, social and emotional status – has to be explained to children!)

[Very bad 1 2 3 4 5 Very good] Why?

What do you think now about the first interview?

2) **Experiences of Family Group Conference**

The child _____ was / was not _____ present in the Family Group Conference (why).

If the child was present, (s)he was there _____ part of the time (why) / all the time _____.

1 First thoughts of what was the most important result of the conference

2 Mood / atmosphere just before the conference

3 Arrival to the conference
- with whom
- of what did they talk about

4 Opinion / experience of the time and place of the conference

5 Opinion / experience of the people that were invited / present in the conference
- who were invited/present, how were they decided
- were there invited/present only such people that the child wanted to come
- was someone, that the child wanted to be there, missing - why

6 Opinion /experience of the helper
- did the child have one, how was (s)he chosen
- the helper's role/action before the conference
- the helper's role/action in the conference
- the helper's role/action after the conference

Importance of the helper in general
Not important at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very important

7 Experiences in the separate phases of the conference
1 arrival / 2 information giving / 3 the private meeting / 4 presenting the plan / 5 at the end
- what happened – new, surprising, glad, troublesome turns – in each phase
- how did it feel like
- did the conference affect the child's situation/mood right away

8 Experiences of the other participants' attitude towards oneself
- what did they ask, how did they listen
- how did the child get her/his own thoughts/wishes forth and how were they received
- how did it feel like

9 Experiences of sharing the own situation and things with relatives and friends
- what was easy, what was difficult
- did the situation change during the conference

Common sharing of the own things in general
Very easy 1 2 3 4 5 Very difficult

3) Experiences of making the plan

1 Opinion of the plan made
- what kind – merits and deficiencies

General opinion of the plan
Very bad 1 2 3 4 5 Very good

2 Experiences of making the plan
- how was it done
- who participated in making it
- how did the child participate, how much did (s)he affect

Experience of the own possibility to affect in making the plan
Very little 1 2 3 4 5 Very big

3 Experience of approving the plan
- what was discussed, were any changes wanted – what

The social worker _____ approved the plan _____ right away / after the changes _____.

4 Experiences of realisation of the plan right after the conference (during the following days after the conference)
- events, changes

5 Thoughts about functionality of the plan from now on and in the future

Trust to the plan (its functioning)
Very little 1 2 3 4 5 Very big

4) Experiences of participation

1 Thoughts about participation and decision making in Family Group Conference compared to earlier experiences of making a plan and decisions
- possibility / compulsion to participate?

2 Thoughts about own possibilities to participate and make decisions in life in general

3 Opinion/experience of, if the first interview, made before the conference, affected the way or amount of the own participation in the conference
- how, how much

5) Ending

1 Thoughts about the FGC-process this far
- good things, bad things, wishes, suggestions

2 Anything in mind that has not been talked about in the interview yet

Mood at the moment
Very bad 1 2 3 4 5 Very good

3 Thoughts about this interview session and about participating in this research in general

Child interview 3/4 (a month or two after the FGC or follow-up-meeting)

Child _____ Date _____
Place _____

Social worker's first name _____
Co-ordinator's first name _____

The interviewer _____ observed / didn't observe _____ the follow-up-meeting.
If the interviewer observed, she did it only _____ in the 1st and 3rd phases / all the time _____.
The interviewer has got acquainted with the plan made in the follow-up-meeting before the interview _____.

1) Beginning

Mood at the moment

[Very low 1 2 3 4 5 Very high] Why?

General wellbeing (a wide concept that includes the child's view of her/his physical, cognitive, social and emotional status – has to be explained to children!)

[Very bad 1 2 3 4 5 Very good] Why?

What do you think now about the previous interview?

2) Changes in the situation / realisation of the plan

Open start with the child …

For example: "You and your family had a follow-up-meeting a while ago. Would you tell me about what has happened thereafter in your life? What is your everyday life like at the moment?"

Then further questions following the child's account – what (s)he wants to talk about concerning her/his situation at the moment and possible changes in it as well as other people's behaviour etc. (realisation of the plan).

After the child's own account, or if (s)he doesn't feel like telling about things on her/his own terms in the first place, the interviewer may proceed with help of the questions below.

1. What has happened after the follow-up-meeting? Has your situation changed? How?

2. Have there been any changes in how the people that participated in the follow-up-meeting are in contact with you or your family? What kind of changes?

3. What about you and your helper? Have you been in contact? Why and how? Have you made yourselves familiar with the revised written plan together with the helper?

4. How has the (revised) plan worked since the follow-up-meeting? (The plan is at hand – may be checked through point by point with the child.)

5. How has each concerned carried her/his part out according to the plan?
   The parents?
   Other relatives and friends?
   Professionals?
   Yourself?

6. What do you think about the plan now? Do you think that the plan will work and that your situation will change? How? How much do you have trust for the revised plan and its working at the moment?
   [Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much] Why?

7. Do you think that the follow-up-meeting/the whole FGC-process has had effect on your own situation? How? (Could the same possible changes have happened also without the FGC)

8. Do you wish something to change in your own situation? What and how?

At the end, the interviewer and the child have a look at the variables that were produced in the first interview session, when recalling the future and at the questions set for FGC to be resolved (and the possible new questions set for the follow-up-meeting to be resolved). The variables are discussed and re-ranked by the child (today's ranks). Alongside with the variables produced with the child, the change is discussed in relation to the questions set for FGC/follow-up-meeting to be resolved.

3) Experiences of the follow-up-meeting

Open start with the child …

For example: "Do you remember what your follow-up-meeting was like? Would you tell me about it?"

Then further questions following the child's account – what (s)he wants to talk about concerning the follow-up-meeting.

After the child's own account, or if (s)he doesn't feel like telling about things on her/his own terms in the first place, the interviewer may proceed with help of the questions below.

The child _____ was / was not _____ present in the follow-up-meeting (why).

If the child was present, (s)he was there _____ part of the time (why) / all the time _____.

1. What do you think as the main result of your follow-up-meeting?

2. How did you feel just before the meeting? With whom did you come there? Did you/what did you talk about the meeting the same day/on the way there?

3. What did you think about the time and the place of the meeting?

4. What did you think about the persons that were invited/present at the meeting? Did you want them all to be there? Was someone important missing? How did they (family members, other private network, social worker, other professionals, co-ordinator) regard you and how did you feel about it? Did they / how did they involve you? How did they manage in the meeting from your point of view?

5. What do you think about your helper and her/his role/actions in the meeting? Did (s)he / how did (s)he help you? How important it was for you to have a helper?
   [Not important at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very important] Why?

6. What was it like in the meeting (compared to the first FGC)? Were there any new, surprising, joyful or troublesome events or turns? What were your feelings?
   - when arriving
   - in the information giving -phase
   - in the private conference
   - in the presentation of the plan -phase
   - when leaving

7. How did you feel about discussing your own situation with relatives and friends (compared to the first FGC)? Did the atmosphere change during the meeting? Could you say aloud everything you wanted to? How did the others regard/ react to your sayings? (Did you feel safe all the time?) How easy or difficult it was to share your and your family's private things with others (compared to the first FGC)?
   [Very easy 1 2 3 4 5 Very difficult] Why?

8. What happened to the plan in the meeting? What kind of a (new) plan was produced? What did you think about it right after the meeting? Were you satisfied with the revised plan?
   [Not at all satisfied 1 2 3 4 5 Very satisfied]

   How much did you have trust for the revised plan and its working right after the meeting?
   [Very little 1 2 3 4 5 Very much] Why?

9. How did the checking and revision of the plan happen? Who participated in the revision of it? How did you participate? How much did you participate in the revision of the plan, for example by discussing what should be included or not included in the plan?
   [I didn't participate at all. 1 2 3 4 5 I participated very much.] Why?

10. What was it like when the (new) plan was discussed in the presentation of the plan -phase? What was discussed? What kinds of changes were wanted?
    The social worker _____ approved the revisioned plan _____ right away / after the changes _____.

11. Did your participation in the follow-up-meeting differ anyhow from your participation in the first FGC? How?

12. What do you think about participation and decision making in the FGC-process compared to your previous experiences in other kind of ways of participating and of making a plan or a decision?

4) Ending

13. What do you think about the FGC-process this far (good things, bad things, wishes, suggestions concerning either the meeting or the whole process)?

14. What do you think about participating in the research-process this far? What do you think about this interview?

15. Do you think that the previous interview had any effect on your behaviour/ participation before the meeting or in the meeting? What kind of an effect?

Mood at the moment
[Very low 1 2 3 4 5 Very high] Why?

Appendix 10. Instructions to the researcher/interviewer

(This is also working paper used in the project; not edited by Mark Phillips)

List to remember: Tape recorder, enough tapes, batteries, paper, pens.
If the child wants to draw a picture of a good future, (s)he is welcome to do that. You can use that as a joint tool and can start making questions using the drawing. You have time, don't push.

The first interview of the child

within a week before FGC, at the end of the preparation phase

1) INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of the interview,

- the interviewer *presents* her/himself and the organisation where she is a researcher. Also connecting to the Nordic countries and children's opinions in all the Nordic countries.
- tell the child the purpose of both the research and this interview. Tell how much (little) you know about the child/family, what is your connection and what is the difference between you and other professionals. Make sure that the child understands what it is about, why her/his interview is important and what is expected from her/him. The child has an important role, (s)he is an expert on his thoughts and experiences, no one else know about these. Tell her/him that we are interested in children's views and in your opinions.
- tell the child about the forthcoming interviews - go through the information given to the child
- It is important to **convince the child about the interview's confidentiality** and that the concerns the child tells about will not come to the parents', the social worker's or anybody else's notice (except if the child specifically wants that). NOTE: At least in Finland, the researcher has the **right to make** a notification if (s)he so feels, BUT it is not her/his obligation! So, we might well decide, that this IS confidential without any ifs. And if the researcher is urgently worried, (s)he primarily discusses the thing with the child and motivates and encourages him/her to discuss the thing with her/his helper.
- Tell about the tape recording

The beginning of the interview session is crucial in creating a safe **atmosphere** in which the child has confidence to bring forth her/his personal ideas and experiences. Creating a relaxed and confidential relationship with the child may take a while, but it is important to give it all the time it takes.

Familiar things for the child may be something in her/his room, age, hobbies, tv-programs – whatever which is also familiar to the researcher – so **both** can feel at home!

Read the documents; questions/agreement beforehand
The interviewer has got acquainted with the questions addressed to this particular FGC (the agreement of/assignment for arranging FGC) beforehand. So (s)he knows, why this FGC is being arranged, what the social worker's worries are. In the first part of the interview (s)he, however, pushes this information out of her/his mind and concentrates on listening the child's own description of her/his life situation.

The concerns that have been written down as questions to be resolved, the interviewer takes up later in the interview. And in this phase also tells the child that (s)he has these documents

2 SITUATION "Recalling the Future"
The child's experience of her/his own today's situation is explored with help of "Recalling the Future" – method. There is only three main questions.

When recalling the future the child
1) *imagines* how the things are after a year (or another defined point in time) when they are fine from her/his perspective,
2) *imagines* who helped her/him and how and what (s)he did to bring about good changes, and
3) *defines* her/his past worries (which are actually his/her today's worries).

1. A year has passed and things are quite well. How are they for you? (What are you especially happy about?)
2. What did you do to bring about this positive development - and who helped you and how?
   (What can you – at least secretly – be proud of?)
3. What made you worried "a year ago" and what lessened your worries

All these main questions are followed by specifying, concretising questions, that help the child to describe the good situation and the processes that have led to it as detailed as possible.

1. A year has passed and things are quite well. How are they for you? (What are you especially happy about?)

The concerns the child raises are named together with the child, using **the child's own expressions**. The "follow-up **dimensions**" are produced of those.

The child may name several dimensions. At the end (s)he is asked to choose three most important and essential of them.

The point in time that is to be assumed and imagined is chosen to be e.g. a year after FGC. Still, a specific question is how the child understands the concept of time. The point in time that the child is asked to imagine, has to be defined case by case, and it can also be allusive. The most important thing is that the child imagines and places her/himself into the future, to a point when time has passed and many things are different and better from now. The child is helped to bring her/his thoughts into the future/the defined point in time in different, concrete ways and by setting milestones for passage of time. Things like the season in question and things related to it, the child's age and school grade at the time, how the child has grown and how (s)he can do some things better than before, can be raised and described with the child.

The purpose of taking thoughts into the future is to create distance to the problematic and worrying present and to free the child to imagine a better life situation. The interviewer's task is to motivate and help the child to start this thought play with the interviewer, to imagine her/himself in a situation in which the good changes are a realised fact. This may take a while and require persuasion, especially if it is difficult for the child to imagine her/himself in a situation in which things are well or even a little better for her/him.

The interviewer must concentrate on and be careful of not starting "if-language" her/himself ("If things were well, how would they be?" or "If everything turned out fine and this and that would happen …" etc.). Instead, the interviewer must help the child to imagine the situation WHEN things are well. How are they then? The interviewer must not lead to themes or solutions (here the interviewer must push the things that (s)he has read from the documents aside in her/his mind). But, specifying questions (in present and imperfect), that raise from the child's answers, are important. With help of those the child is asked to concretise good situation and describe it as detailed as possible, in different life areas.

The child and the interviewer together name the things that the child raises, and the interviewer writes those down on the paper. That means that the interviewer repeats aloud what the child says (as in therapy the therapist helps the client to express and give names to the experiences (reference? 19??) and writes down the expression the child uses in the child's language without any adult conceptualisation (Riihelä 1996). After writing down the child's own expressions, the interviewer may suggest another formulation if it is needed to clarify the idea. If the child has for example described, in her/his own language, that (now when the situation is good) there isn't fighting and shouting at home all the time etc. etc., the interviewer may ask the child if that could be named as "mother and father in harmony", if that is what (s)he means. Thus the child hears the thing she told about as formulated by the interviewer, and (s)he can specify and correct the interviewer's interpretation.

In the first part of the interview, in recalling the future, when the child describes her/his own situation, the interviewer must not keep in mind the motivations and questions that are written in the documents of FGC and ESPECIALLY NOT LEAD to them. The purpose is to stay apart from the worries and questions defined by adults (social worker and parents) and posed for FGC. The adults' definitions come forth only through the child – as much as the child has heard and internalised those as her/his own.

2. What did you do to bring about this positive development – and who helped you and how? (What can you – at least secretly – be proud of?)

After the child has described a future situation in which everything is all right, (s) he is asked to tell, who gave and what kind of support to change things better, and what (s)he her/himself did to bring about the good changes.

The interviewer gets back to the concerns the child raised before (the named dimensions) and of each of them (s)he asks what kind of *support* the child got and from *whom* in the matter, so that it turned out well. In their minds, the child and the interviewer are still in a future situation in which everything is all right. The persons the child mentions (relatives, friends, professionals) and the support (s) he describes are written down on paper too (e.g. beside a named dimension the persons and beside the persons the ways of support).

In the follow-up interviews it is interesting to review these too, and look, together with the child, if and how the persons and the ways of support (s)he imagined when recalling the future, are any similar to those that realised after FGC in practice/reality.

3. What made you worried "a year ago" and what lessened your worries?

At the end, the child and the interviewer return to the time, when the child/the family/the social worker had worries, and a FGC had been decided to arrange. The child is asked to "recall" the past situation (which in reality is the present situation) and the problems and worries (s)he had then.

The idea is, that after first describing a good situation and raising/imagining her/his own and other people's resources, it is easier for the child to talk about today's worries and problems and to specify and analyse those to an interviewer. In the light of the worries and problems the child now defines, the above produced dimensions are reviewed again.

If the child raises a new concern, it is added to a dimension-list. Last, the interviewer asks the child: What was it that made your worries go away/lessen then, a year (or another point in time) ago? What happened?

It is important to realise, that Recalling the Future –method is also an intervention! When the child is asked to imagine a desirable future situation and

also who are and how involved in the improvement of the situation, it guides and prepares the child for the forthcoming FGC.

At the end of this first part of the interview

These things, that are named with the child, make dimensions for each case-based follow-up. At the end of recalling the future the child is asked to give today's "ranks" for these named things/dimensions: if in the future, when things are well, a dimension's rank is e.g. in the right edge of the line segment, where is it now? Dimensions produced like this are a tool for following-up the child's subjective experience of her/his own situation. Also the child is told that the things that (s)he has now raised will be reviewed and revaluated in the following interview sessions, and the meaning is to follow how the situation, as described by those things, has changed / developed.

After going through all three questions, the interviewer goes back to the dimensions that the child has presented concerning both the good future and the worries. Now (s)he asks the child to give a "rank" to each of them.

The scales may look like e.g.:

Named dimension 1 (E.g. "mother and father in harmony")	In the future	_____X___
	Today	_____X_____
Named dimension 2 (E.g. "no harassment in the school")	In the future	_____X_
	Today	__X_____

Named dimension 3

And so on …

At the end of recalling the future the dimensions are reviewed with the child, and (s)he is asked to give them two "ranks": First the **rank it has in the good** (**future**) **situation**, second the rank it has **today**. The ranking lines are just lines without numbers. For young children there may be a smiling face at the right end, an unhappy face at the left end. Each line (each dimension) has it's own paper (A5 for example), so that after producing all the dimensions and after ranking each of them the child is asked to move the papers to an order which tells their mutual ranking of importance to the child.

Suggestions for how to concretise the child's experience when (s)he gives the ranks to the dimensions:

After ranking a dimension's *future state,* the child is asked also a qualitative description of the dimension's future situation. Thus, as focused to this more narrowly defined state of affairs, it might be informative to hear the child's concrete description of **what it means in practice**. So, when ranking the dimensions at the end of recalling the future, the child could be asked first a quantitative description (the place on the line), then a qualitative description of the situation.

The other suggestion was, that after ranking a dimension's *today's state*, a good question might be "**Why do you give this rank to this dimension today?**" (to find out if something has just recently happened that affects the ranking) and "Why didn't you give this dimension a little bit higher (or lower) rank?" The child's "because"-answers might sometimes be very informative.

With the help of recalling the future, together with the child, the "follow-up dimensions" have been produced for the changes that the child expects and hopes. The child has by her/himself, with help of an interviewer, named concerns that are significant for her/his own wellbeing. (S)he has also defined, how far today's situation, concern by concern, is from the situation (s)he hopes. These dimensions are reviewed and re-ranked after the follow-up meeting and two years after FGC.

3) FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE

After recalling the future (exploring the child's situation in general) the child is asked her/his ideas and experiences of the preparation of FGC.

The following questions are opening, and they should be followed by many specifying questions. (How to guide the interviewers?)

The questions are focused separately on the "facts" and the "experiences", although those are connected and possibly inseparable in the child's mind. A "fact" here means the child's observations and understanding of why the things are/were or happen/happened in a certain way, her/his description of a situation or a process. An "experience" means the child's feelings and thoughts concerning the situation or the process. In the following (questions 6 – 10) the first part of a question refers to a fact and its second part to an experience.

4) PARTICIPATION

5) WELL-BEING IN GENERAL

6) ENDING

At the end the interviewer thanks the child for the answers/discussion that are most important and valuable for the research and for developing the method as well as child protection work in general. The next steps are discussed (the timing and the purpose of the following interview). And the interviewer promises to be available (by phone) at any time, if the child has any concerns regarding the research process.

Appendix 11. Tom's story

I'm 15-year-old, in the eighth grade in school, and I live with my mom and three little brothers and mom's partner. Otherwise I'm fine, I mean that I spend quite a lot of time with my friends, and also school goes well enough. But, the situation at home has for a while been quite bad. Things started to go worse with me and mom when I was about 13. The rules were very strict at home and I got tired of listening to her as she complained and yapped at me about all kinds of things. We started to have terrible fights, and sometimes I even happened to attack her physically. Also I've got to fight with my younger brother all the time, because he keeps annoying me on purpose.

With my dad we were on bad terms before, and I didn't exactly have much dealings with him. But now, since about a year ago, he's started to keep more contact. We've been out together to eat or something, and things like that, and he's given me money if I've needed it. There havn't been any fights between me and my dad, and that's one of the reasons why I'd like to spend more time with him. Some time ago I didn't see any choice but moving to live with him, because we had so many times looked for a solution to how I can get away from this apartment. Now I think that maybe I can, after all, live with my mom, if that situation at home somehow calms down. So that I'd spend weekends at dad's place for example. But, for now must just see how these things go.

Many times we went to talk at the social office, and every time they tried to press something on us, like try this now and try that now. The only thing that has been of any use is that youth program, which I've been taking part in and which ends now soon. Its leader is quite ok. Last fall that our new … what is it now … Nelly something (social worker) suggested that we arrange that, what's the name of this whole thing now … Family Group Conference. At first I was quite, like, I don't really feel like starting some kind of process again. But, as she explained more about it and praised it, as it's so good and so on, then I agreed. Because I wanted something to happen finally for this situation. Because I thought, it must be for finding some solutions to what is asked and so on.

Then they started to arrange it, and those people who hold that meeting (co-ordinators) came to visit us. They just said something like about what's gonna happen there, and its features and so on. It really was quite good that they came, because they really tried to make sure that everything goes just the best way. With them we then looked through those Nelly's (social worker) and Bob's (youth worker) … those that they had written, those … (summaries). There actually was something odd in those (summaries), but then I didn't feel like really putting effort into them that much. The questions (social worker's) were quite good, even though I didn't quite understand some of them. We've been there so many times to talk, that Nelly managed to somehow outline those things.

Then we thought about who'll be invited to that meeting, and then some disagreement came between mom and dad. Dad wanted some people that mom didn't want, and then mom wanted some people that dad didn't want. I mean, of course dad wanted to put a couple more (on the list), because already there some of those that dad wanted had already been asked. Then I didn't know if I would have a helper after all and what she's supposed to do. I mean, I asked a friend of mom's, for there really wasn't anyone else that I could think of, but there was so much hassle that I wasn't sure if she was going to come or not. Also, otherwise it would have been nice to know some more about what's going on and so on, to somehow be aware of how the process is moving on. For they (co-ordinators) didn't particularly tell me me about things, I mean they really kept them just between adults. I think they told me something only, at most, to make it possible to decide who'll come there and the time of the meeting. And then they showed me the questions. Very little they told me.

But I went to that meeting quite willingly. Beforehand I thought that maybe I would say some of my opinions there, and then I listen to the others. That these things must be just settled among those who there are now.

That Family Group Conference was then, after all, quite a good meeting. That morning I was a little tense, I guess, for I felt somehow low. But I got over it, especially because we already managed to bring about a fight on the way there, mom and me. But, quite an ok meeting, I'd say, nothing to complain about or like. Something at least happened there. At the beginning there was some kind of quarrel between mom and dad, which was expected, I'd say. But then it was somewhat a surprise that it went so that they made up. Well, in a way made up, but at least in the way that they are gonna somehow communicate with each other from now on. Also otherwise the atmosphere changed somehow for the better. I mean that at first everybody was somewhat over-tight, but then at the end no-one felt like harping on about something useless.

What I was a little irritated about, was that mom tried all the time to squeeze everything out of me, like tell, tell, mainly to defend herself, I guess. I do understand that, but still it was irritating. At times I had to clear up something, like what it's been about, as mom herself had totally misunderstood something. And at times I had to explain something. But I didn't want to interfere that much in everything, that way I got off more easily. Concerning my uncle (father's brother), I wouldn't have believed that he could in that way be a chairman and assist all the time and so on. That was surprising, and also mom, especially when we left, mentioned Mike, Mike, Mike, all the time. And the aunt (father's sister) too, she was lots of help, I wouldn't have believed it beforehand. And dad's friends too, at least I know now that I can do something with them too.

Well, those decisions felt quite good too. They asked me my opinion quite a lot and also suggested theirs quite a lot, and then I just heard about what they thought. Quite good solutions they achieved. Like one thing, a little surprising too, was that

mom gave in over the point that I can decide about my own money. And now I somehow accept too that I live with my mom, although I hoped in the beginning that dad gets an apartment and I move there for good, and maybe visit mom every second weekend or so. I just didn't feel like starting arguing about that matter with them any more. After all, almost all the other things then went according to what I said there, in a way. And then I really believed that everybody was serious with those things. I mean, that those decisions will hold too.

Well, the rest (presenting the plan –phase) went ok too. The only one I didn't quite understand was that other people were there (social worker's colleague). Someone really odd, I haven't ever even seen her, and she asked such odd questions. Like I said to her so many times, I said straight to her, that no, I won't take anything new from outside any more. Then she still started to press some kind of family therapy on me and so. Otherwise the meeting was quite ok, and I think that everybody left for home in a good mood. The only thing was that it was so long, the whole thing. I mean that I got really tired at some point. And then it was so cold, we were frozen the whole time.

Well, straight away on Monday I bought a new mobile phone and a membership card to a youth house and I got the ice skates sharpened and … As now I can use my own money however I want and as much as I want.

Otherwise there hasn't been much change after that (Family Group Conference), nothing in fact. I mean that it's been quite normal, mainly I'm out with friends. Quarrels with mom haven't really decreased at all, like she keeps on finding fault with something all the time, on such stupid things, like all the time jadajadajada and blahblahblah behind my back, and all the time trying to push something on me like do this and do that. And then I always object to her. Well, it's not that the situation has got worse either, it's just that I'm really starting to lose my nerves with her … I mean that I'm tired of listening to her at all any more. I'm not saying that I don't make mistakes with her too, but still. The best would be if she just kept her mouth shut.

With dad it goes as before, I mean we meet and call by phone. But it's not quite … I haven't stayed there a weekend even once or been overnight, cause always something's come up why it hasn't worked. Yeah, I've been a bit disappointed with that. And I don't know at all if he's handed in that application for an apartment or not. We'll see then in the next meeting … Hard to say. I don't, like, have anything to complain about with him, but I just wished he'd keep his promises and that.

And mom and dad, they haven't like been on speaking terms with each other. I mean, something totally stupid has come up, like dad should for some reason inform mom about every euro, even if he gives me money for the bus. That's what mom and Kenneth (mother's partner) have then complained about.

Grades at school have dropped lately, though. I guess it's all this that's been going on now that's affected them so that I haven't managed to concentrate on lessons. But one thing that's been quite positive is that I've happened to be a lot

more with my relatives and dad's friends. Once I spent a weekend at my aunt's, and also some of them came to ours for my birthday, and then I've sometimes had a talk with Fred (dad's friend).

I haven't seen any plan, whatever it is, not sent to me, anyhow. But I do believe that those things that were agreed there, somehow hold true. I mean, after all that's happened and what I've heard, I don't fully believe that they all hold true. As mom already makes out, like argues against everything, like dad hasn't done this and that, and he won't get an apartment and so on.

I can't really say now if the whole Family Group Conference has been good or bad. We'll see later, how these things eventually go.