

Navigating virtual participation

Guidance note on effectively coordinating FGCs with a combination of in-person and virtual participation

The Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) is a global social impact company. They interviewed Youth Justice Coordinators and Care & Protection Coordinators to identify key enablers and barriers to Family Group Conference (FGC) attendance, and in the context of COVID-19 have produced this guidance on how FGCs can best be run with a combination of in-person and virtual participation.

Family Group Conferences and COVID-19

As New Zealand transitions to Alert Level 2 and physical distancing becomes less imperative for some groups of people, the need for coordinators to remotely engage with participants ahead of FGCs and to facilitate FGCs with some or all participants joining virtually – including both phone and video participation – will remain important for months to come.

The following guidance, based on Youth Justice (YJ) and Care and Protection (C&P) coordinator insights combined with behavioural science, can mitigate some of the challenges of virtual coordination:



Build in breaks to keep participants engaged and alert, and to give yourself an opportunity to check in with individual people



Use waiting periods productively by anticipating them and giving people activities and tools to help process during these times



Check your tech ahead of the FGC to ensure that participants (including professionals) feel confident about the platform you'll be using



Be personal through small acts that symbolise gestures you would have done under normal circumstances



Give people individual attention when communicating prior to the FGC, particularly for building trust around privacy and confidentiality



Increase pre-FGC communication by liaising between groups to prevent surprises and enable participants to address the concerns of others



Call out the elephant in the room to break the ice and invite people to speak up about the challenges of participating virtually

01. Build in breaks

Breaks give FGC participants a chance to process what is being discussed and keep everyone from getting restless. They also give coordinators an opportunity to check in with people, which is particularly important with virtual participants whose emotional cues may be more difficult to interpret.

- ✓ For telephone and video FGCs, plan breaks at times when you normally would take a break during an in-person conference. Most coordinators suggest not going longer than about an hour without a break.
- ✓ Use breaks as an opportunity to check in with people individually. If some participants are attending the FGC in-person and others are dialing in, breaks are particularly valuable opportunities to check on the remote participants.
- ✓ If you are concerned about participants not dialing back in after the break or having trouble rejoining, have everyone turn their camera off and mute themselves rather than hanging up.
- ✓ For FGCs that you anticipate being particularly long or intense, divide the conference into multiple shorter sessions to give participants (and yourself!) a break.

02. Use waiting periods productively

Waiting can feel awkward and frustrating, and can make people feel unempowered or disengaged with the process. Finding ways to fill both long waiting periods (e.g., the weeks before a postponed FGC can be held) and short ones (e.g., waiting for all participants to arrive or call in) can help people feel valued and prepared.

- ✓ For FGCs in which some participants attend in-person and others are dialing in, virtual participants are more likely to be on time. In anticipation of this and to keep virtual participants from becoming frustrated by the other participants' lateness, have a small activity you can do with them as you wait – such as choosing a karakia or icebreaker for the group.
- ✓ In mixed virtual/in-person FGCs, breaks can be an awkward time for those participating by phone or video. Use the beginning of the break to check in on how they're doing, and then encourage them to take a break as well (use the bathroom, stand up and stretch, make a cup of tea) and assure them that you won't start again until they've returned.
- ✓ For YJ FGCs that have been postponed, give rangatahi small "assignments" to help them develop ideas about what they would like to see in their plan and how they might respond to the requests of the victim.

- ✓ For YJ FGCs that have been postponed, give victims guidance templates with prompt questions about what they would like to say to the young person and what reconciliation would look like to them.

03. Check your tech

While access to technology and data is a problem for some FGC participants, for others, the tools are there – they just aren't comfortable or confident with how to use them. Testing tech capabilities with participants (including police and other professionals) will help keep technological difficulties from being a source of distraction and frustration during the FGC itself.

- ✓ Do trial calls with all participants who will be participating virtually. Besides helping catch technological difficulties ahead of time, these calls are also an opportunity to build rapport and trust with participants and address questions or concerns they may have about the FGC.
- ✓ At the start of the FGC, have participants practice (1) muting and unmuting themselves; (2) for video calls, turning their camera off and on; and (3) saying their name each time they speak.

04. Add personal touches

It feels strange to share an experience as intimate and personal as an FGC virtually, especially if you don't know the person well. Adding small personal touches to the way you engage with participants ahead of time— even when you're just reaching out to inform someone that the FGC will be postponed for a few weeks— could help build trust and rapport and may enable attendance at the eventual FGC.

- ✓ When reaching out to a participant for the first time (for example, a victim or whānau member you have not met before), support the phone call with a visual that includes a picture of yourself (this could be delivered to their home or attached to an email).
- ✓ If both you and the participant feel comfortable and safe with you doing so, stop by their home and say 'kia ora' from their garden. This demonstrates your commitment to them, and may be a particularly meaningful gesture for participants who live alone and have had limited social interaction recently.
- ✓ If you can do so in a way that is safe and compliant with current Alert Level requirements, deliver tea bags, milk, and biscuits to participants who will attend virtually. This is a nod to the kai that participants would typically share in an FGC if everyone were physically together, and demonstrates that the sentiment of that gesture remains.

05. Give people individual attention

Making individual contact with participants— even those in the same bubble and/or whānau— requires more time, but doing so may enable participants to be more open about their needs or concerns. Similarly, one-on-one calls to explain privacy and confidentiality requirements can help build trust and endow personal responsibility.

- ✓ Make individual contact with participants in preparation for the FGC. A silver lining of people staying home is that many participants will have more time to talk to you and fewer competing demands for their time.
- ✓ Use the COVID-19 response as an opportunity to thank participants, particularly rangatahi, for doing their part to protect their community by staying home.
- ✓ Discuss privacy and confidentiality with participants in a one-on-one format rather than via communication to the entire group. This will allow participants to ask questions more openly, help build individual trust, and deepen their sense of responsibility to protect the privacy of the conference. *Note: in the beginning of a conversation about privacy, describe your current surroundings (home, office, etc.) and what you're doing to respect their privacy, and ask if this is suitable to them. This invites reciprocity for them to do the same.*
- ✓ If multiple participants will be participating remotely, make a map of who will be present in which bubble so that you can more easily call on participants by name during the conference itself.

06. Increase pre-FGC communication

Anything that can happen prior to an FGC to clear tensions or clarify intentions becomes extra important for FGCs with virtual participants, because it will be more difficult to gauge how people are doing when you're not physically with them.

- ✓ For YJ FGCs, give young people and their whānau information about what the victim would like to achieve from the FGC in advance so that they can begin planning how they will respond.
- ✓ For C&P FGCs, ensure that participants are aware of and understand all of the concerns being raised by the social worker to mitigate feeling attacked and overwhelmed during the FGC itself.
- ✓ Offer to host virtual hui-a-whānau to give participants a platform to talk through whānau matters prior to the FGC.

07. Call out the elephant in the room

When we digitise interactions that would normally take place sitting around a table or in another shared space, some things may be lost. Some moments may be awkward. Things will certainly be different – and acting like they're not doesn't help anyone. Acknowledging the situation up front helps break the ice and may facilitate participants' empathy toward one another and you.

- ✓ Express what you would have done under other circumstances (e.g., “I wish I could shake your hand/ talk about this with you over tea, and I'm sorry that we can't do that right now”).
- ✓ Acknowledge the strangeness of some of the new norms (e.g., “I know it feels weird to say your name every single time you speak – it feels odd for me, too, but we're all in this together”).
- ✓ Don't skip or shorten the opening, even if it feels awkward. Encourage those participating virtually to introduce themselves fully, and open the conference in the same manner you would if everyone were together in person. It can be tempting to move through things more quickly when you're interfacing digitally, but don't throw the baby out with the bathwater!

Choose the method that helps you reach your objective, and the tools that support your method.

As New Zealand enters Alert Level 2 and physical distancing requirements continue to relax, there may still be instances in which joining an FGC via phone or video remains a valuable option for some participants.

Focus first on *what* you want to achieve from an individual's participation, and then choose a method to help you get there – the digital engagement tools available to you may or may not play a role in that method. Keep virtual participation options in mind as a tool to offer participants who:

- Belong to population groups that are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 and the flu, including the elderly and people with autoimmune disorders
- Are on the fence about attending an FGC due to anxiety about a confrontation during an in-person FGC (particularly victims, for YJ FGCs)
- May not attend because of the inconvenience or difficulty of arranging transport or childcare
- Are participating from outside the region (give them agency through options where possible – for example, the choice to dial in from home versus going into the nearest Oranga Tamariki office to use AVL)
- Have had trouble in the past with keeping their temper in check, and may be aggressive toward other participants if they attend in-person.