

# Involving Families in Decision Making in Child Welfare: A Review of the Literature on Family Meetings

Conducted by the Child Welfare Partnership, Portland State University  
April 2010

## Executive Summary

Family matters. Family engagement is the heart of good child welfare practice. In response to a request from Oregon's child welfare system, researchers at the Child Welfare Partnership reviewed over twenty years of research on family meetings as they are used in child welfare practice. This review found strong empirical evidence that meetings are a valuable approach to family engagement in case planning, and are associated with improved outcomes for children and youth, including outcomes for children and families of color, and children who fall under the parameters of the Indian Child Welfare Act. The research also identified key practice components that contribute to the effectiveness of meetings.

### Outcomes associated with family meetings

- Safety: decreased re-entries to child welfare, reduction in domestic violence
- Permanence: diversion from foster care, identification of kinship resources for out of home care, return home, placement stability
- Culturally responsive practice: increased knowledge of cultural and traditional supports, reduction in worker bias, improved trust between agency and family.
- Well-being: positive developmental gains
- Foster care reduction: shorter length of stay, overall reduction of foster population, cost – neutral or cost savings
- Worker and family attitudes: family prepared for court processes, family satisfaction with/ownership of case plans, workers attitude towards families improves.

### Key components of successful meetings

- Adequate preparation time (days, weeks)
- Ample family members at meeting (maternal and paternal side)
- Clarity in purpose or goal of the meeting
- Discussion of family strengths, honesty about concerns.
- Allotment of sufficient time to develop a plan,
- Skillful facilitation (usually external to agency, though co-location found to be of value)
- Use of a series of meetings to monitor plan enactment
- Family private time (in some models, such as family group conferences)
- Meetings located in familiar safe surroundings (not social service agencies)
- Assure culturally congruent meeting practices, such as involvement of elders in planning, drawing on cultural faith traditions, culturally familiar locations and food, conduct meetings in family's language (use interpreter for mono-lingual English speakers)

History Oregon was an early implementer of family meetings using a range of approaches. Family meetings were a central feature of the System of Care Reform and the Family-to-Family initiative and family group conferencing plays a key role in some tribal child welfare programs. Since 1997, Oregon statute has had statutory provisions regarding family meetings. Practice varies from District to District in how the practice is implemented, and funds are limited.