

Considerations for Private Family Time

There are important criteria and factors to consider in making the decision for private family time.

1. **Safety:** If there are concerns that the physical or emotional safety of any family meeting participant is in jeopardy, then private family time should not be considered. Safety for all involved should be assessed on an ongoing basis from the facilitator's first contact with the family and throughout the conference process.
2. **Balance of Power:** The facilitator should examine the room dynamics to assure that there is a balance of power within the room. One example that would preclude meeting alone would be that the biological mother comes to the conference alone and the estranged biological father comes to the conference with all of his family members. This would be a very uneven and threatening balance of power that the facilitator would want to consider very seriously before allowing the family to meet.
3. **Family Wishes:** If the family does not want to meet alone, or feels uncomfortable meeting alone they should not be forced to do so.
4. **Group Size:** If only one or two family members are present, it would not be advisable for them to meet alone. In this case, however, the facilitator must be very careful to empower the family to ensure that there is a level playing field between them and the professionals in the decision making process.
5. **Productivity/Level of Understanding:** In the case of groups that are extremely low functioning as a whole, it is sometimes necessary to keep a professional present to make sure that the group stays on task and that a plan is generated. This is a subjective assessment that is usually made through the course of the conference, but it is also an assessment that the facilitator should be very cautious about making.
6. **Interpersonal dynamics:** The family meeting process, as a whole, is a dynamic event. Facilitators should be constantly assessing the interpersonal dynamics occurring during the meeting to inform decisions related to private family time.

Frequently Asked Questions About Private Family Time

Should resources be offered to the family before private family time?

Providing a litany of formal resources in advance of private family time poses a number of challenges. Will sharing explicit resources limit family member's thinking about the types of formal and informal resources they integrate into the plan they craft or drive them to a more system-focused solution? Alternatively, in the absence of detailed resource information, will family members have enough knowledge to reasonably create and resource a plan? It is prudent to provide enough information for family members to have an understanding of available community resources. An extensive service listing, on the other hand, may discourage them from tapping their informal supports and resources and may convert their discussion from identifying their needs to one of determining services. Any resource gaps can be further reviewed and attended to during the decision stage of the family meeting.

Are fictive kin a part of private family time?

As devised in New Zealand, only family members related by blood or marriage participate in private family time. It is believed that the inclusion of fictive kin (i.e., individuals who are "like" family but are not related by blood or marriage) compromises the plan, because family members are less likely to fully share information with individuals they do not trust. The purpose of private family time is to provide a safe venue for family members to freely communicate when crafting their plan.

In the United States, family constellations are often organized to include fictive kin as important family members. Through preparation activities, the facilitator works with the family to identify individuals to participate in private family time, with the inclusion or exclusion of fictive kin carefully considered. At the family meeting, the facilitator may caucus with family members to determine fictive kin's potential participation in private family time. While the facilitator works to honor family members' interests, the facilitator also has the responsibility to safeguard the process. Often, fictive kin identified by one family member have little to no relationship with other family members. While their presence may be comforting to a participant, their inclusion in private family time could jeopardize the decision.

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What happens if family members ask the facilitator and service providers to stay during private family time?

It is fairly common for family members to ask the facilitator and other service providers to stay in the room during their private family deliberations. This request typically occurs because family members:

- have not been adequately prepared or have not fully understood the process;
- do not believe in their capacity to create solutions as a group;
- are entrenched in a climate of “clienthood,” where they expect others to craft the solutions and don’t believe the “system” is embracing them as primary decision makers;
- are uneasy because it may be an emotionally charged time; and
- may want to leverage a non-family member to embrace their plan.

Some have argued that if the family members ask the facilitator or service providers to stay, it is disrespectful to ignore their wishes and leave them in private to deliberate. To the contrary, private family time signals to the wider family the public agency’s belief in the family’s decision-making capacity, encourages the emergence of family leadership, and reflects the underpinning value that “families are their own experts.” Unless there is a new concern for participants’ safety that cannot be rectified (at which time the family meeting is stopped to create an intermediate safety plan to conclude the family meeting), the facilitator or service provider should firmly yet politely leave the family alone.

What happens if the family can’t agree on a plan?

While the international data show that families reach agreement and referring workers accept plans 95% of the time (Merkel-Holguin, Nixon, & Burford, 2003), there are instances when family members do not concur on the best course of action. The family members present their opinions to the referring worker and others who didn’t participate in the initial plan development. After listening, the referring worker encourages family members to take additional time in private to reach consensus. If, after further dialogue, family members still cannot come to an agreement, the referring worker and family has various options: (1) a decision can be made by a public agency representative; or (2) if the case is court-involved,

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various options can be presented to the judge for a decision. Oftentimes, families prefer playing a significant role in the decision and will rededicate their energy to finding a consensual solution.

Who has to agree with the plan?

The family and the referring worker from the public agency must agree with the plan for it to move forward. If the case is court-involved, the judge has final authority to approve the plan. While family members typically reach consensus on a plan, if family members have different opinions, they can present the various options to the referring worker and service providers during the decision stage. Upon hearing the options, the referring worker, informal familial supporters, and other resource providers may be able to highlight areas of consensus and encourage the family to take additional time to reach a consensual plan. For a court-involved case, a judge can hear various versions and be the arbiter.

