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FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCES AS THE TECHNOLOGY OF RESTORATION OF FAMILY RELATIONS: RUSSIAN EXPERIENCE

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Currently, one of the most difficult and urgent areas in the social sphere is working with families at risk, because there are issues that stay unresolved. Such as: neglect of the needs of children; deformed child-parent relations; broken ties in the family after a divorce; high level of families which depends on aids; low competence and lack of parents' responsibility for the child. In this regard, experts are looking for new technologies to work with these families. Traditional ways to solve these problems are to control the family, to have a pressure on it and to provide a set of services by government. While the most important in these situations should be an activation of the internal potential of the family and the transfer of responsibility to it, the mobilization of informal resources of assistance, and in the end the provision of an independent family exit from the crisis.

In such cases, families sometimes feel that the professionals are making all the decisions and they are not being given much to say. To make it easier for families to be involved in making plans when children are vulnerable is to use a Family Group Conferences (FGC). It's a special technology, which gives an opportunity for all family members to get together, to make a plan, which will help them to solve problems that have been identified by family itself and by professional who works with this situation (teacher, social worker or psychologist). The conference is arranger by an independent coordinator.

The method originated in New Zealand, where for the local tribe – Maori always were important family ties and traditions. After the crisis of social work, when a large number of Maori teenagers were brought up in boarding schools for offenders and specialists ignored the help of their families, this technology of reconciliation revived in New Zealand. Then FGC spread to other countries and recently appeared in Russian practice [1. P.116].

Now in our country is not a big number of specialists who has used Family conferences in their practice. Nevertheless, in some regions there is already a certain experience in conducting them. Therefore, I decided to do a research on a precedential practice of FGC in Russia by analyzing cases and in-depth interviews with specialists who has relevant experience.

The family group conference includes several stages. It's more expedient to show them on a specific case - a crisis situation in a foster family, where the adopted girl appealed to a social rehabilitation center for minors with a desire to refuse an adoptive mother [based on interview materials and a case study analysis].

1. *The referral.* The girl has lived two weeks in a social rehabilitation center for minors and in the conversation with specialists said that she has bad relations with her guardian and wants to go to live to the orphanage. Specialists, after listening to her and talking with her guardian, decided that family conference is possible in this situation.

2. *Preparatory meetings with all participants of the FGC*, during which they formulate key questions and give their agreement to participate in conference. The first meeting was with a girl. The important questions for her were: «Where and how will I live?», «Can I meet with my friends and go to visit them?», «Can I choose electives on my own?».

During the meeting with the guardian, the following questions were identified for discussion: «When will the girl begin to have good grades at school?», «When will she begin to treat the guardian's money responsibly?». In addition, preliminary meetings were held with other members of the extended family.

3. *Preliminary meetings with specialists*. In this case, it was a meeting with a teacher and psychologist. The main theme of the conference was «How should live Olya, to stay in a foster family?».

4. *Conference*. At the beginning of the meeting, the topic of the conference, its principles and rules are announced. Specialists give their advices how to make things better. Then family members discuss their problem. After that, specialists and coordinator leave the room and family began to work on the plan by themselves. This 'family plan' should address questions that have been identified earlier. In this case, family put on the plan that: Olya will stay with the guardian and will begin to study hard at school. When the situation stabilizes, she can choose any electives. Guardian will give her pocket money and they will visit the psychologist together. When the plan is ready, specialists are invited again to verify it and then the conference is completed.

5. *Monitoring*. The coordinator monitors the family's implementation of the plan. During the research it was revealed that in most cases the family accomplish the actions prescribed in the plan, or in a short time re-gathers together to write a new one, but this happens very rarely.

According to the interviews with specialists, the experience of conducting FGC in Russia shows that this technology can be very useful for families at risk. At the moment, this method is implemented primarily by non-profit organizations, as well as by socio-rehabilitation and psychological centers. Family conferences can be considered as a perspective innovation in the social sphere, because it allows not only to provide direct services to the family, but also to help family to activate its resources and resolve crises by itself. That is why the experience of family conferences in Russia deserves more attention from researchers and practitioners and we need to search for resources for its expansion.

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