



Restorative Practices

E FORUM

Making the Circle Bigger:

The Netherlands' Eigen Kracht Holds its 1000th Family Group Conference

BY JOSHUA WACHTEL

Earlier this year Eigen Kracht, a non-governmental social service agency in Amsterdam, Netherlands, conducted its 1000th family group conference (known as family group decision making in the US). By the time eForum got in touch with Eigen Kracht's founder and director Rob van Pagée in September 2007 that number had already reached 1200.

"The pace is accelerating," said van Pagée. "When we started in 2001 we trained 14 independent coordinators and two teams of facilitators but had no conferences. It took five months to get the first conference. Everybody said, 'This is a great idea... but not for my clients.'"

Van Pagée started his career as a social worker dealing with child abuse cases, so he understands the system. "I had to go to the mother and kids and the father (who might be drunk or absent), speak to the school and the home physician (never neighbors, because of privacy issues). I returned to my supervisor and said, 'This is what's happening. I think we should do this and that.' This is how decisions are made. Then you go back to the family and say, 'This is the plan.'"

In the family group conference (FGC) model used by Eigen Kracht (Dutch for "Our Strength" or "Our Power") the process is very different. Not only immediate family but also aunts, uncles, grandparents and other concerned relatives, friends and neighbors are included in the decision-making process. A facilitator's job is to meet the members of a family who have requested a conference, find out their needs, make a list of people to invite, and coordinate the place and time for the conference.

The conference itself has three parts. First is "Sharing of Information," where the facilitator explains to those present the issues at hand, and experts may explain what help is available. A social worker may also explain any legal issues. Under Dutch law an FGC plan will be accepted by social services and family court unless it is deemed unsafe or illegal.

Second is the portion known as "Private Family Time," the meat and bones of the conference. At this time, the facilitator and social worker leave the room, and the family is left alone to meet, discuss the issues and develop a plan. Specifics of the plan are written down and presented in the final part of the conference, the "Presentation of the Plan," during which the facilitator, social worker and other professionals are invited back into the room.

In a recent informational documentary film presented by Eigen Kracht, a family guardian for child protection services says to a family during the information period, "Every family owns its own problems, but also its own answers... It's best if the answers are found within your circle."

This is a fundamental idea of FGC and other restorative practices — that those most involved know best how to solve their problems. Some theorists say that courts

An Eigen Kracht family group conference (FGC) circle.



and government institutions take people's conflicts away from them. Restorative processes return those conflicts to whom they belong, help strengthen communal and family ties, and give people the satisfaction and the responsibility of solving their own problems.

Even in cases where there seem to be few social connections, the results of a conference can be surprising. Said van Pagée, "Belief in the possibility of making the circle bigger is often small. Many think that people don't care. That's nonsense. We haven't had any problem with that." He said the average conference has 14 participants — people willing to take responsibility for what's going on and to make plans.

One conference involving an immigrant couple from Burundi with no family and few close friends illustrates this perfectly. The two were forced to quit their jobs

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and their schooling to care for a young daughter who had both kidneys removed and required daily dialysis and two trips a week to the hospital. The parents severed what few communal ties they had when they moved to live closer to the hospital.

At first the couple said they didn't know anyone who would come to a conference, but a facilitator elicited names of friends and acquaintances, and when the conference convened, a wide community of support was on hand to help the family take care of the ailing child. One man even volunteered to take a two-week training to learn how to dialyze the child.

Said the facilitator, "There are lots of people who love doing things for each other, entirely voluntarily, because they feel a bond with the family with the problem."

The conference was also interesting because it was suggested by the Kidney Foundation, a medical society, rather than a social service agency, an indication that the concepts embodied in FGC are starting to be seen as widely applicable. This is very much in line with van Pagée's attitude. He is a believer in "participatory democracy," he said. Eigen Kracht aims to "widen the circle," a reference to the fact that conferences are conducted literally with people seated in a circle, but there are metaphoric implications, too. Van Pagée added, "When there are conflicts or problems we need more and more participation."

Another key to Eigen Kracht's FGC model is to contract facilitators who are not social workers and who have no personal stake in the outcomes of the conferences they facilitate. "A facilitator may be a piano tuner, a butcher, a salesman... Secretaries are excellent," said van Pagée, "because facilitating a conference requires, above all, strong organizational skills."

As more facilitators are trained, more people in the community get to know

about conferences and may have the opportunity to take part in one. Van Pagée said that over the years Eigen Kracht has trained 270 facilitators, although many more are needed to serve all of the Netherlands. "People are really enthusiastic about this work. It's a lot of work," he said, "about 30 hours for preparation and the conference itself, but then it's over. And it's a good way of people being in contact with other people completely outside their network."

Van Pagée added that having independent facilitators helps keep the integrity of the model. "They are there for the family. They ask, 'What do you want? Who should be included in the conference? Where should this be done?' and 'What do you want to eat?' They are connected to the needs of the people and not any agenda of their own."

A conference involving a Turkish family illustrates a number of these points. The conference was suggested by a woman whose niece had run away from home several times. The young girl's father was very angry because he had no control over her and had even threatened to kill her. The aunt had learned about conferences as a participant in one for a neighbor.

Van Pagée said, "The Turkish family had a lot of issues around growing up, dressing and acting like classmates, and these things were not OK." A Turkish facilitator, versed in the language and culture, ran the conference. During Private Family Time the facilitator could hear a lot of noise and shouting and yelling in the other room.

Afterwards, the aunt said, "We have explained to my brother: 'You are an OK father, but you are living in another country now.'" What could never be said and accepted by a social worker could be said by family. The absence of professionals helped make that possible.

The conference resulted in the girl living with her grandparents, and van Pagée

reported that two years later things are still working out.

Van Pagée is a pioneer not only in his home country; he also has visited and conducted trainings in Hungary, Russia, Ukraine, Slovakia and Poland. He said, "This is a good thing to bring to central and eastern Europe. The systems are now developing, and it is a good moment to implement these ideas." He added, "People make connections to old traditions, informal citizens groups... Everywhere in the world people have solved problems in circles."

Van Pagée believes circles can be expanded to many other areas of social life, too. He described a case in Amsterdam where a youth center had been closed down because some children were misbehaving there. Van Pagée is hoping a conference can be convened and facilitated by some of the children for both adults and youth in the community to help develop a plan for the future.

Van Pagée wants to see circles in health care and jails, plans for families at the beginning of prison sentences (when, for example, a woman is left without her husband to take care of the children), in cases of domestic violence, in schools, the workplace and the community.

Van Pagée concluded, "We say, everywhere a plan and decision needs to be made, first convene a circle and ask the participants what needs to happen."

For more information about Eigen Kracht, please go to the English language version of their website: <http://op.eigenkracht.nl/international>. To watch a video produced by Eigen Kracht with English subtitles, please go to: <http://op.eigenkracht.nl/Movie+Eigen+Kracht>.

For more information about family group decision making (FGDM) and family group conferencing (FGC), including links to more articles on the subject, please go to: <http://www.familypower.org>. ☉