



QIC•AG

**IMPLEMENTING FAMILY GROUP  
DECISION MAKING (FGDM)  
LESSONS LEARNED  
BY THE WINNEBAGO TRIBE  
OF NEBRASKA**

## OVERVIEW OF THE QIC-AG

The National Quality Improvement Center for Adoption and Guardianship Support and Preservation (QIC-AG) is a 5-year project working with eight sites, each of which is either implementing an evidence-based intervention or developing and testing a promising practice, which if proven effective, can be replicated or adapted in other child welfare jurisdictions. Effective interventions are expected to achieve long-term, stable permanence in adoptive and guardianship homes for waiting children as well as children and families whose adoption or guardianship has been finalized.

The QIC-AG is funded through a 5-year cooperative agreement between the Children's Bureau, Spaulding for Children, and its three university partners: the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Texas at Austin, and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

## OVERVIEW OF THE INTERVENTION

The Child & Family Services (CFS) program of the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska seeks to provide culturally appropriate services focused on successful safety, well-being, and permanency outcomes for children and families. However, CFS did not have a recognized, culturally competent, family engagement practice to promote decision making related to permanence. To address this need, the Tribe's Stakeholder Advisory Team selected *Family Group Decision Making (FGDM)*, a practice model that reaches back to indigenous practices of the Maori people of New Zealand.

*FGDM* honors the inherent value of involving family groups in decisions about children who need protection or care. As opposed to decisions, approaches, and interventions that are handed down to families, *FGDM* is designed as a deliberate practice that restores the balance of power to the families. Families lead the decision-making process, and the statutory authorities agree to support family plans that adequately address agency concerns. A trained *FGDM* coordinator supports the family throughout the process, including the initial referral, preparation for the conference, decision making, and follow-up after the action plan is in place.

With specific overlays to reflect the Ho-Chunk culture and language, the *FGDM* model aligned with the cultural values the Stakeholder Advisory Team sought to recognize and support families as they determined the best permanency option for their children. These overlays led to the creation of the *Wažokj Wošgq Gicq Wo'upj* (Possible Cultural Family Choices) *FGDM* program. For the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska, the *FGDM* target population is children ages 12 to 19 years for whom the Tribal Court has entered a non-reunification permanency goal.

The initial and ongoing training, supervision, and coaching in *FGDM* was made available to the Winnebago Tribe through the Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, and is supported with coaching provided by the Family Service Rochester organization in Rochester, Minnesota.

## SNAPSHOT OF LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**1. ALIGN THE INTERVENTION TO THE CULTURE OF THE COMMUNITY TO PROMOTE UNDERSTANDING AND BUY-IN**

**2. ESTABLISH CULTURAL CREDIBILITY THROUGH COLLABORATION WITH STAKEHOLDERS**

**3. COUNTER COMPLICATIONS ENCOUNTERED IN CONTACTING FAMILIES BY ALLOTING MORE TIME AND USING A VARIETY OF RECRUITMENT METHODS**

### LESSON 1: ALIGN THE INTERVENTION TO THE CULTURE OF THE COMMUNITY TO PROMOTE UNDERSTANDING AND BUY-IN

The cultural norms, values, and language of the target audience are intangible factors that are too important to overlook. Engagement often occurs only when families feel they are understood and respected as individuals. Early in the project, the Winnebago site team realized they needed to deeply understand the unique Ho-Chunk cultural attributes so they could ensure those attributes were reflected in the intervention.

The Winnebago team selected a model that closely aligned with the Ho-Chunk belief system. However, the site team went further to specifically infuse the model with Ho-Chunk language and culturally relevant processes. In addition, the lessons the site team learned about Tribal culture helped them to shape new tools for the intervention. Even the basic genogram was enhanced to reflect the unique Winnebago Tribal structure and family preferences of the Ho-Chunk people.

The site team also had to reconcile differences between the Tribe's cultural language and Western cultural "system" language to clarify concepts and policies. Even commonly used terms connote different meanings in different communities.

For example, to support Winnebago families, the site team needed to clarify what was meant by the term *permanency*. In Winnebago culture, children are a part of families, clans, and the Tribe; as such, in the Ho-Chunk language there is not a word for orphan or adoption. Therefore, discussing permanency as it is commonly defined was complicated and required the team ensure terms were clear and used in ways that reflected Winnebago culture and values. Through a series of conversations with the staff, elders, and families in the community, the site team came to understand that the "need for permanency" was better defined as "a need for stability." Thus, the materials created for the *Wazokj Wošgq Gicq Wo'upj* intervention described the options available for families to provide a long-term, stable home for a child. Adapting the systemic processes to the Ho-Chunk culture made the FGDM program feel familiar and effective. Families came to view FGDM as a means to do what was right for Winnebago families in the "Winnebago way."

### LESSON 2: ESTABLISH CULTURAL CREDIBILITY THROUGH COLLABORATION WITH STAKEHOLDERS

If a new intervention is to be effective and successful, a critical first step in designing the intervention is collaboration with key stakeholders. Inclusive partnerships with transparent dialogue can both enrich the program and circumvent

pitfalls. The *FGDM* team leveraged a broad collaboration that included the Winnebago Tribal elders, service providers, Ho-Chunk Renaissance (a language support and cultural etiquette service provider), legal counsel, Winnebago Tribal Court, intervention purveyors, evaluators, and consultants. Involving these vested entities allowed the team to recognize the cultural nuances and ensure cultural congruence so that more Ho-Chunk families would choose to participate.

Working together, the Stakeholder Advisory Team identified resources needed to improve permanency/stability outcomes. The *FGDM* purveyor provided technical assistance and training to ensure that the program would be valid in the Ho-Chunk setting. At the same time, the local stakeholders were able to identify areas where the Tribal code and cultural practices needed to be reconciled with agency practices, which resulted in some policy changes. Because the new intervention was being developed “by the Tribe, for the Tribe,” the collaboration emphasized Tribal sovereignty.

Ultimately, the collective input of the stakeholders was necessary to standardize the *Wažokj Wošgq Gicq Wo’upj* *FGDM* process and embed Tribal structure and culture. The elders were consulted regularly to review each element of the intervention. The time spent to build a common understanding of the project resulted in mutual respect and fostered buy-in from the community. The site team heard that families trusted both the program and the program’s coordinators to resolve difficult questions about a child’s future. Families shared comments such as, “Our people have done this before,” indicating that the program was consistent with the Winnebago Tribe’s culture and history.

### LESSON 3: COUNTER COMPLICATIONS ENCOUNTERED IN CONTACTING FAMILIES BY ALLOTING MORE TIME AND USING A VARIETY OF RECRUITMENT METHODS

Bringing families together in a program is difficult if organizers cannot reach the family. The Winnebago site team found that contacting families was much more challenging than anticipated.

Connecting with families often requires many types of outreach over an extended time. The site team started the recruitment effort by mailing a letter and flier to target families,

asking them to voluntarily participate in the *FGDM* program called *Wažokj Wošgq Gicq Wo’upj*. However, a lower than expected response rate made it apparent that a letter was not enough to encourage participation. The site team modified their recruitment plans to incorporate follow-up to the letter using in-home visits and/or face-to-face meetings.

Scheduling in-home visits and face-to-face meetings was rarely a straightforward process because many families lived in houses that did not have a physical street address or a land line, and cellular coverage and Internet connectivity is limited in this rural area. These circumstances impeded recruitment, engagement, and obtaining consent for the *FGDM* services. In most cases, the *FGDM* coordinator spent more time than anticipated on recruitment because scheduling each meeting required multiple attempts to contact the caregivers, children, and families. However, the time invested in contacting difficult-to-reach families proved to be worthwhile. According to the *FGDM* coordinator, “Once we were able to meet face-to-face with the families and share the *FGDM* model, the families understood the study and they were more willing to participate.” The challenges of contacting and engaging families must be taken into account when developing an implementation plan in a rural community; even then, emerging challenges might require mid-course adjustments in the outreach process.



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