

# SELF-STUDY COURSE

## Understanding Team Decision-making

*Updated February 2009*

### 1.0 Hour Credit

**NOTE:** The Team Decisionmaking Meeting is a practice currently practiced in the Office of Children's Services Anchorage Regional Office and is beginning to be used in the Fairbanks Office of Children's Services. It is not yet a standard practice in other parts of Alaska but plans are to institute this practice around the state in the near future.

***CREDITS:***

*Conversations with Darryl Batangan, TDM Facilitator with the Anchorage Office of Children's Services Regional Office. September 2006.*

*Skills and Awareness Development s of TDM Facilitation, Annie E Casey Foundation Family to Family Initiative. January, 2004.*

*Family to Family: Tools for Rebuilding Foster Care Video: Team Decisionmaking. Annie E Casey Foundation 2001*

*Family to Family: Tools for Rebuilding Foster Care Article: Team Decisionmaking: Involving the Family and Community in Child Welfare Decisions. Annie E Casey Foundation 2001*

If you wish to receive training credit for reading this self-study, please fill out the "CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING" Questionnaire" at the back of this course. Return the questionnaire to the Alaska Center for Resource Families for 1.0 hour of training credit. The course is yours to keep for further reference.

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# Understanding Team Decisionmaking

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## Introduction To TDMs

Team Decisionmaking (TDM) is an approach that involves the gathering of interested people and parties to join efforts to make good decisions for the best placement of children in the child welfare system. It is a core strategy of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family-To-Family Initiative which is being implemented throughout the State of Alaska to improve the child welfare system. The Family-to-Family Initiative includes four core strategies for improving the child welfare system.

*Building Community Partnerships*

*Recruiting, Training and Supporting Resource Families.*

*Self Evaluation and Data Collection*

*Making Decisions as a Team*

This self study focuses on the implementation of the last of these strategies of *Making Decisions as a Team*, also called Team Decisionmaking. In this short self study, we will discuss:

- What is Team Decisionmaking and why are we doing it?
- What is the Role of the TDM facilitator?
- What happens at a TDM?
- What is the role and responsibility of the foster parent?

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## What Is Team Decisionmaking?

The concept of Team Decisionmaking, or using a team of people to make a decision that was once just made by a social worker, is one of the four founding blocks of the Family-to-Family Initiative. The idea is simple -- gather as many people as possible that are involved or concerned with a family's wellbeing, including the family itself, and work together to find the best solution and plan for the safety and wellbeing of a child.

The Team Decisionmaking Meeting, or a TDM, is a meeting held prior to each potential placement event affecting a child who may possibly be coming into the jurisdiction of the Office of Children's Services. These potential placements may include: *initial removal from a child's birth family; change of foster care placement; and reunification*. The goal in each case is to hold a TDM before the child is moved or the day after emergency removal before a court hearing in order to gather all those who are involved with a family together to work jointly on making

decisions. (Currently in Fairbanks, TDMs are used when children first come into care. In Anchorage, they are used at the time of any placement change.)

## Why Are We Using TDMs And What Is The Advantage?

Team Decisionmaking is a different way to make the decision around placement of children in child welfare. In the past, an individual social worker and his/her supervisor would often make the decision in isolation, but TDMs pull together a team, including the family itself, to bring their wisdom and information to the table.

A TDM improves the quality of the decision by considering more information and more ideas from a variety of people connected to the family. It shares the responsibility, and the investment, in the decision and provides a specific, individualized intervention plan for a specific family. It also involves and gives a voice to families, caregivers and providers and the community in protecting children and strengthening families. Team Decisionmaking improves outcomes and ultimately reduces the time spent in resolving crises and placement breakdowns.

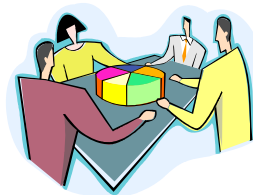
Team Decisionmaking involves not just foster parents and caseworkers, but also birth families and community members in all placement decisions to ensure a network of support for the child and the adults who care for them.

If we truly believe that strong families lead to good outcomes for children, and that connecting families to their communities, then TDMs can begin that shift to looking at how communities and extended families can be used to help provide a support to parents and children.

The benefits of TDMs have already begun to be felt since OCS starting using TDMs in Anchorage in 2005 . Some foster care placements have been prevented when the group was able to identify and put into place the supports for a struggling family. TDMs have helped to identify relative and kinship care placements and help with the recruitment of foster homes who know the child. Some social workers have even talked about the unexpected advantage of the TDM's ability to help "slow the process" down and allow careful consideration and shared responsibility for the decision of whether to take children into placement.

## What Happens At A Team Decisionmaking Meeting?

The goal of TDMs is to make the best decision possible with the maximum amount of information by bring a circle of people connected to the family to the table. Families are invited to be an active part of the decision-making. The plan is not pre-decided and forced upon them.



Potential placement changes that may require a TDM might include:

- *initial removal from a child's birth family,*
- *change of foster care placement*
- *reunification*

## Team Decisionmaking Values

- *A group can often be more effective in making good decision than an individual*
- *Family are the experts on themselves*
- *When families are included in decision-making, they are capable of identifying their own needs and strengths*
- *Members of the family's own community add value to the process by serving as natural allies to the family and as experts on the community's resources.*

Quoted From "Skills and Awareness Development s of TDM Facilitation"

TDMs may be held in the community, close to where the family lives or is comfortable. They may also be held at the local Office of Children's Services or even at the local Court Building for TDMS that take place after emergency removals of children. When you are contacted to participate in a TDM, make sure to find out where the TDM is going to be held.

A TDM usually lasts 1 to 2 hours. The meeting is led by a trained facilitator who keeps notes and facilitates the discussion. This facilitator is not a social worker assigned to the case and is trained specifically for the role of leading a TDM toward a consensus.

Ground rules are outlined and agreed upon that allow each person to have a voice, to establish safety for each person in the room, and to establish that all information shared in the TDM be confidential. Ground rules establish that only one person speaks at a time

and side bar conversations are not allowed.

## Who Might Be Present At This Meeting?

There is no limit of who may be at a TDM. Participants may include birth parents, current caregivers such as foster parents or relatives, the child if appropriate, relatives and supports for the family, community partners, services providers, tribal representatives, Guardian Ad Litem, caseworker or supervisor, involved staff and the facilitator. It is preferable that the family be provided an opportunity to have as many of their identified supports as possible so that they are not overwhelmed, or "outnumbered" by the professionals in the room.

The meeting should give everyone a chance to talk, to speak and to be heard. The facilitator will often start by framing the goal and the purpose of the meeting and invite each party to share their perspective of the situation. The idea is to hear from everyone and share everyone's information and insight.

Decisions are made by consensus. The facilitator will lead the group through the problem solving process to determine what would be in the best interest of the child. The decision is written up in a report by the facilitators and shared with all the parties involved.

One of the values of TDMs is to work upon a Strength Based Model. That means the group doesn't just focus on "what went wrong," but looks both honestly at the resources and strengths that a family brings. The group tries to build a plan for safety for a child based on the support system that the family may have in place. If the child is able to remain with the family or with a

relative instead of coming into foster care, as a concrete safety plan must be developed children. This plan must be specific, measurable and achievable.

Safety is still the primary goal of the TDM, but trying to reach this goal takes into account what family strengths may already be in place.

At a TDM where the plan is removal of a child from his birth family, discussion will also be held about scheduling an “Icebreaker.” An Icebreaker is a facilitated meeting between the birth parent and the foster family to share information about the child.

## **What Is The Role Of The Facilitator?**

TDM facilitators play a critical role in the meetings they facilitate. It is often the facilitators more than any other participant who sets a tone of welcome, comfort, safety and openness for the meetings.

The TDM is led by a skilled, immediately accessible, internal facilitator who is not a case carrying social worker or line supervisor. The facilitator focuses the group’s energy on a common task to reach a decision about a placement issue that protects and provides safety for the child in the least restrictive/intrusive manner possible. The facilitator is trained to move the group through the problem solving decision-making process in the time allowed and strives to develop a consensus decision with participants.

The facilitator makes sure that everyone understands the guidelines and the goal of the meeting. He or she includes every one in the process and explains the purpose and goal of the meeting for all to understand. This is especially important for birth family members who may be confused or not understand some of the complicated processes of the child protection system. The facilitator also solicits everyone’s agreement regarding the right to privacy information.

## **How Might Foster Parents Be Involved In A TDM?**

A team decision-making meeting can be held at a variety of points of a family’s involvement with OCS. A TDM is a meeting held prior to each potential placement event which may include:

- First consideration of a child coming into a possible foster care placement
- Possible movement from one foster care placement to another
- Reunification—movement from a foster care placement to reunification with birth family.

During meetings, it is important that foster parent identify what they need to successfully care for a child. It is important that foster parents be an active participant and to treat birth families and social workers with respect.

When foster parents are included as part of the TDM, the foster parents can share their views about the child’s needs with the team. If a child is making the transition into the foster family’s home, foster parents can learn from other about the child’s needs, particularly their attachment to the birth family. Foster parents also become even more important if the placement change

involved a child returning home, or going into a long term placement with a relative or possible adoptive home. Foster parents can participate in the plan to support the parents' efforts to achieve reunification and be more active in helping the child to make a safe transition home.

In TDMs where the decision is to remove a child from a birth parent and place in a specified foster home, an Icebreaker meeting may be scheduled between the birth parent and the foster parent. An Icebreaker meeting provides a voluntary opportunity for birth parents and foster parents to talk about the needs of the child. This meeting involves just the foster parent and the birth parent and is facilitated by the social worker.

If the TDM is called because of a potential change in placement from one foster home to another, it is helpful for the foster parent to approach the meeting in a positive way, looking at how this meeting can help the child. Foster parents can talk about their views of what the child needs, but can also identify what they might need in order to prevent the removal of a child from their home. Focusing on strengths and resources can help support foster families as well as birth families and the TDM may be used as a tool to help prevent a change of placement for a child if possible.

### **To Learn More About Team Decisionmaking:**

- Check out the Annie E Casey Foundation video "Team Decisionmaking: Involving Family and Community in Child Welfare Decisions" available through the Alaska Center for Resource Families' lending library.
- Go to the Annie E. Casey Foundation website at [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org).
- To learn more about Icebreakers, check out the self study course "Understanding the Icebreaker Meeting" available through the Alaska Center for Resource Families' Lending Library.