

# Section 6. Conduct family meetings

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Child Welfare meets with family members to inform decisions regarding a child's safety, permanency and well-being and address issues on safety, case planning, or specific needs of the family or the child. Such meetings advise and engage the family, their support system and the service providers in the activities, services and supports used for the Child Welfare Case Plan. Meetings can be powerful events and are most successful when the purpose is understood, appropriate participants are included and the responsibility for decision-making is clear to all participants. Meetings can provide a model of open communication and use of problem-solving skills.

## Purposes of meetings

The caseworker most often uses a meeting to:

- Consider options in developing an ongoing safety plan;
- Address a specific issue or goal;
- Gather and share information for the decision-making process;
- Identify family and community resources that can support child safety;
- Provide information and direction to the family, extended family and services, and to providers regarding expected activities, tasks and support;
- Determine a substitute care placement appropriate to meet a child's or siblings' needs;
- Communicate the indicators used to measure progress; and
- Develop or review a child's permanent and concurrent permanent plan.

Before any meeting, the caseworker must:

- Thoroughly prepare to effectively communicate information about the purpose of the meeting to participants, and
- Underscore Child Welfare's responsibility for the safety of the child in the decision-making process.

## Types of family decision meetings

There are two types of family decision meetings:

- An Oregon Family Decision-making Meeting must be considered in the case planning process whenever a child has been removed from the family home for more than 30 days. This meeting is defined in statute, and allows family members to have input into case planning decisions.

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- A Family Decision Meeting is used when the family's input is appropriate in making a variety of case planning decisions.

### **A. Oregon Family Decision-making Meeting (OFDM)**

An OFDM must be considered, by Oregon statute and administrative rule, in the case planning process whenever a child has been removed from the family home for more than 30 days. The caseworker must consult with the supervisor to determine whether to use an OFDM. This meeting focuses on family members' ideas about the child's safety and permanency. The meeting can be used to assist with the Protective Capacity Assessment and options presented by the family may be considered by the caseworker when developing the Child Welfare Case Plan.

An OFDM allows the family to have input into child planning decisions. Child Welfare will use the family's ideas to the extent the family's plan protects the child, builds on family strengths and is focused on achieving safety and permanency for the child within a reasonable time. Child Welfare, through the caseworker, retains final authority for decisions affecting child safety, but participants may contribute information, expertise, resources and support to develop and implement the Child Welfare Case Plan.

### **Decide whether a meeting is appropriate**

#### **Procedure**

- After a child is placed in substitute care for more than 30 days, decide whether to arrange an OFDM. If an OFDM is appropriate, it should be held, if possible, before the child has been in substitute care for 60 days. However, it can be held after 60 days if necessary. Reasons to decide not to hold a meeting include:
  1. Parents are unwilling or unable to participate;
  2. Extreme conduct of the parents requires an alternate permanent plan;
  3. Participant safety cannot be ensured;
  4. High levels of conflict prevent the likelihood of a successful meeting;
  5. Child Welfare is awaiting court findings; or
  6. Other meetings have determined the Child Welfare Case Plan services and actions.
- However, even if some of these circumstances do apply, a meeting to obtain family input and identify possible family resources may still be appropriate.
- Also consider:
  1. The impact of cultural values on family roles and participation.

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2. The effects of domestic violence, a participant's intellectual ability, mental illness, drug addiction or other issue that may limit the ability to contribute or may require additional support for participation. Separate meetings may be scheduled if a parent is at risk of further violence.
  3. Coordination with law enforcement and the district attorney's office when there is a current criminal investigation to:
    - a. Share information;
    - b. Determine roles and responsibilities; and
    - c. Avoid contaminating the ongoing criminal investigation.
- Consult with your supervisor if you are unsure whether to hold a meeting, as a supervisor must approve the decision not to hold an OFDM.
  - If the decision is to not hold an OFDM, document the rationale and justification for the decision in OR-Kids.

### Working with the family

#### **Procedure**

- Inform the family of the required participants in the OFDM. They include:
  1. Parents
  2. A child 12 years of age or older
  3. A child younger than 12 years of age if appropriate
  4. When a child is 14 years of age or older, up to two persons who they select to be on their case planning team. These persons may not be the caseworker or foster parent.
  5. Grandparents
  6. An American Indian or Alaska Native child's tribe
  7. Any other family member who has had significant, direct contact with the child in the year before the substitute care placement.
- Ask the family about other persons they would like to invite to the meeting. The responsibility of identifying other participants may be shared with or delegated to the meeting facilitator. (Refer to Appendix 3.6, Facilitator role and qualifications.) Some examples of other participants include:
  1. Members of the family's faith community
  2. Teachers and other school officials
  3. Medical or mental health professionals
  4. Child care providers

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5. Persons with a significant attachment to the child
6. Other persons who have an interest in the safety of the child, including family friends
7. The new caseworker, if case transfer is anticipated

The child's substitute caregiver (if parents want their participation and the substitute caregiver agrees to attend)

- Discuss the purpose of the meeting and give the family opportunity to present a plan for the child's safety and permanency.
- Inform the family the following information will be shared at the meeting:
  1. The impending danger/safety threats identified during the CPS assessment.
  2. What is currently known about parental protective capacity. This should include cognitive, emotional or behavioral abilities that are family strengths or areas that need to change.
  3. How the child is vulnerable to the identified impending danger/safety threats and the seriousness of the impending danger/safety threats.
- Consider any special circumstances when deciding on participants.
  1. **Safety.** Exclude family members if they compromise the safety of other participants. However, a parent may submit written recommendations that address the plan for the child. Restraining or no contact orders may not be violated to attend an OFDM. (Refer to Appendix 3.7, Domestic violence and sexual abuse considerations.)
  2. **Parent hospitalization.** Consult with the medical provider to determine whether the parent can participate. Phone conferencing or written recommendations may be an option.
  3. **Parent incarceration.** Arrange phone conferencing for the incarcerated parent whenever possible, unless the parent's incarceration is a result of sexual or physical abuse of the child or of other family participants. In these situations, the parent may submit written recommendations for the child to the caseworker.
  4. **Special needs accommodations:** Arrange special accommodations for physical access, language interpreters or alternative methods of communication.
  5. **Professional disclosure of information:** Professionals follow their agency and professional guidelines for disclosure of information.
- Discuss the role of the various participants with the family, which is to present any concerns they have for the child's safety, permanence or well-being needs, and to make recommendations based on their knowledge of the child and family. (Refer to Appendix 3.8: OFDM agenda, to help explain the meeting process.)
  1. Explain the use of the Authorization for Use and Disclosure of Information (MSC 2099) to the parent, and seek permission to contact participants and explain the reason for the OFDM.
  2. Obtain the parent's signature on the MSC 2099. Form 2099i has helpful instructions for completing the MSC 2099.

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Domestic violence and patterns of control and intimidation may not be identified in the family before the ODFM. As a general practice, routinely screen for domestic violence and develop a back-up plan to handle situations if they arise. Discontinue the meeting if domestic violence of attending partners is suspected and continuation would create an unsafe situation. The facilitator does not disclose the reason for ending the meeting if doing so would create an unsafe situation, but would end the meeting tactfully.

For more information, refer to Domestic Violence Practice Guidelines at [www.oregon.gov/dhs/abuse/domestic/dvcouncil/dv-standards.pdf](http://www.oregon.gov/dhs/abuse/domestic/dvcouncil/dv-standards.pdf).

### Invite and prepare participants

#### **Procedure**

- Contact participants and prepare them to develop their ideas to protect and care for the child.
- Ask if there are other family members or participants who should be invited to the meeting. If additional persons are identified, the parents should be notified and their consent requested.
- Determine a date and time for the OFDM that allows all participants to attend. The needs of family members who must travel or have scheduling conflicts should be met as much as possible, including evening times if necessary.
- Determine the meeting location:
  1. Meetings are usually held at the local Child Welfare office but may also be scheduled in the community.
  2. If an alternate site is considered, select a location that is safe and has adequate seating, space, privacy and accessibility for all participants.
- Help the family obtain child care for the meeting if needed.
  1. Follow the protocols of the local Child Welfare office.
  2. Supportive or remedial day care may be used when the need cannot be met through other means.

### During the OFDM

#### **Procedure**

- Provide information and other pertinent Child Welfare history about identified impending danger/safety threats.

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- Share information about parental protective capacity, including apparent willingness and ability, to protect the child from identified impending danger/safety threats.
- Present the ongoing safety plan.
- Provide information about potential action, activities or services to enhance parental protective capacity.
- Focus conversation on addressing identified impending danger/safety threats and on the child's safety and permanency.
- Identify and explore ideas that may contribute to a successful family plan.
- Support family ideas and plans that could be incorporated into the Child Welfare Case Plan.
- Thank all participants for attending.

### After the OFDM meeting

#### **Procedure**

- Send copies of meeting notes to all family participants within 21 days [required by ORS 417.375(5)].
- Incorporate ideas and family plans developed during the meeting into the Child Welfare Case Plan so the plan does the following:
  1. Protects the child from the identified impending danger/safety threats;
  2. Builds on the family's enhanced protective capacities (strengths); and
  3. Focuses on achieving permanency for the child within a reasonable timeframe.
- If the family's plan developed at the OFDM cannot be incorporated into the Child Welfare Case Plan, document the reasons for this in the permanency planning section of the case plan.
- If an OFDM was not held, explain the reason in the permanency planning section of the case plan.

### The supervisor's role

#### **The supervisor:**

- Attends the OFDM whenever possible.
- Ensures either the caseworker or the facilitator is an expert in child safety or a Child Welfare staff person who is a child safety expert attends each meeting.
- Approves using Child Welfare staff trained in facilitation rather than a contracted facilitator when there are insufficient resources for a contracted facilitator.

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- Reviews and approves a decision not to hold an OFDM.
- Reviews and approves the decisions made during the OFDM that are incorporated into the Child Welfare Case Plan.

### **B. Family Decision Meetings**

At other times a **Family Decision Meeting (FDM)** may be appropriate to inform decisions around topics such as case planning, child placement, addressing a child's particular needs, addressing a parent's treatment needs, planning reunification or implementing the concurrent permanency plan.

An FDM is not a required meeting but can be used to efficiently and effectively do casework. When scheduling an FDM with family members, be clear on the purpose, decisions to be made and anticipated results of the meeting and be sure to communicate that to all participants. The caseworker may conduct a meeting alone or use a facilitator if the meeting will discuss complicated issues or involve difficult decisions. A facilitator can help guide the flow of the meeting. Consult with the supervisor to determine whether to have a facilitator for the meeting.

### **Procedures:**

#### **Before the meeting**

- Follow local office protocols to schedule a meeting in a timely manner.
- Follow local office protocols to schedule a facilitator for the meeting when you and your supervisor have determined this is necessary.
- Invite the child's parents, other family members, persons with significant attachment to the child or other persons involved in the case who may have information or offer services that will contribute to the purpose of the meeting.
- Always invite a child aged 14 and older and at their option, two members of their case planning team if the purpose of the FDM is to discuss case planning. Children 14 and older and their two team members must always be included any time case planning is being discussed.
- Notify your supervisor when the family meeting has been scheduled.
- Prepare to share information on the purpose and what you expect to accomplish at the meeting.
- Share identified impending danger/safety threats and any family history of abuse or domestic violence with the facilitator **before** the meeting convenes.

#### **During the meeting**

- Explain to participants the purpose of and the decisions or actions that may result from the meeting.
- Always be aware it is your responsibility to make decisions that are in the best interests of the child and will keep the child safe.

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- Be attentive and responsive to options presented by meeting participants.
- Help participants understand how Child Welfare is working toward the child's safety and permanency.
- Be open to the ideas from the family and other participants while remembering you are responsible for making decisions that will impact the child's safety.
- Involve the parents as much as possible.
- Affirm and support options that are the least intrusive and ensure child safety.

### **After the meeting**

- Document the results of the meeting in OR-Kids case notes.
- Confirm commitments from participants when specific actions or services are agreed upon at the meeting.
- Provide copies of meeting notes to all participants.

### **The supervisor's role**

#### **The supervisor:**

- Attends meetings whenever possible.
- Ensures either the caseworker or the facilitator is an expert in child safety or that a Child Welfare staff person who is a child safety expert attends each meeting.
- Reviews and approves the decisions made during the meeting that impact the ongoing safety plan or Child Welfare Case Plan.

### **C. Special considerations, exclusions and exceptions during a meeting**

#### **Domestic violence and sexual abuse**

(Refer to Appendix 3.7 for more information on domestic violence and sexual abuse.)

- Consider the issue of domestic violence when planning a family meeting. Family meetings are for the care and protection of children and not used to stop violent behavior. Individuals who batter may also be parents. They should be consulted about their recommendations for placement of their children, and involved in service and treatment planning for the abuse that has occurred.
- Ensure the facilitator and the supervisor or designee have the skills and know the strategies to recognize symptoms of domestic violence.
- Assess the level of danger both within the larger family system and for individual participants.
- Clarify the purpose of the meeting and emphasize the highest priority is child safety.

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Domestic violence and a pattern of control and intimidation may not be identified in the family before the meeting. As a general practice, routinely screen for domestic violence and develop a general back-up plan to handle these situations if they arise.

- Exclude the alleged perpetrator when previous history or current assessment indicates a risk of violence by a parent, or when contact is prohibited. Family members may be told not to attend the meeting. The caseworker can arrange for input through written information, consultation before the family meeting or by phone if appropriate.

### **Child care**

- Help the family obtain child care for the meeting if needed. When there is an immediate need, the caseworker follows protocols of the local Child Welfare office.
- Request supportive or remedial day care funds when day care will be needed for other scheduled meetings and cannot be met through other means.

### **Adaptations**

- Arrange for, if necessary:
  1. A translator
  2. An interpreter for hearing-impaired clients
  3. An advocate for a client with mental illness or developmental delays

### **Law enforcement involvement**

- In cases where law enforcement is involved in a criminal investigation, work closely with law enforcement, the district attorney's office or a child advocacy center to:
  1. Share information;
  2. Conduct joint interviews when appropriate;
  3. Coordinate roles and responsibilities; and
  4. Avoid jeopardizing the ongoing criminal investigation.
- Staff the case with the county's local multi-disciplinary team.

### **Parent hospitalization**

- Consult with the medical provider to determine whether:
  1. The parent can participate;

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2. Any special accommodations are necessary for the health or comfort of the hospitalized person; or
3. Telephone conferencing may be an option.

### **Parent incarceration**

- Arrange for phone conferencing for the incarcerated parent whenever possible and when the parent's incarceration is not a result of sexual or physical abuse of the child.

### **D. Other meetings with a family**

The caseworker may meet with family members on other occasions to share or obtain information from the family, extended family or service providers. A meeting may be used to discuss specific activities, tasks or supports for the family, coordinate the methods for measuring progress, or review the permanent and concurrent permanent plan. These meetings do not need a facilitator.

### **Procedure**

- When scheduling a meeting with the parents and other family members the caseworker:
  1. Secures the date, time and location of the meeting;
  2. Ensures all participants receive information in #1 above; and
  3. At the beginning of the meeting is clear on the purpose of the meeting.

### **Forms and references**

#### **References**

- Developing and Managing the Case Plan, [OAR 413-040-0005 to 0032](#)
- CPS Assessment, [OAR 413-015-0400 to 0485](#)

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