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What is a family group conference?

(Also known as a family group meeting)

Introduction

A family group conference (FGC) is an opportunity for family members to get together to make a plan for their child which addresses the problems identified by professionals who know the child (like a teacher or social worker), with extra help being given by the agencies involved. FGCs are also known as family group meetings (FGMs) but in this advice sheet we use the term FGC to refer to both.

Note: FGCs (and FGMs) are not the same as ‘family meetings’, which are arranged by social workers directly with the family.

From time to time, families may have difficulties caring for their children. This can be for a range of reasons, from family bereavement to the parent/carer having health problems or overwhelming personal difficulties. In these circumstances families may be involved with outside agencies, including

- i) specialist agencies, which provide a particular service, for example bereavement or individual counselling; or
- ii) Children’s Services, which can provide extra support to families to help their child develop normally and reach their full potential,¹ including practical support, advice on parenting, respite care if the parents/carers need a break from looking after their children and sometimes financial support. For more information, see FRG advice sheets on ‘[Family Support Services](#)’: <http://www.frg.org.uk/need-help-or-advice/advice-sheets>; and
- iii) Children’s Services, which becomes involved if a child is at risk of being harmed and needs to be better protected. In these circumstances, social

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workers normally discuss with the family what needs to happen to make sure the child is safe, and what help they arrange to improve the situation. For more information, see FRG advice sheets 'Child Protection Procedures': <http://www.frg.org.uk/need-help-or-advice/advice-sheets>.

In these situations, families sometimes feel that the professionals are making all the decisions and they are not really being given much say. To make it easier for families to be involved in making plans when children are vulnerable, many agencies, particularly Children's Services, offer families an FGC.

This advice sheet is for anyone who may become involved in an FGC. It explains how FGC's work and what they mean for families. We have divided it into the following sections:

- Part 1: gives basic information about FGCs (page 3)
- Part 2: covers frequently asked questions (page 10)
- Part 3: suggests where you can go for more information (page 18).

The advice sheet is quite long because there is a lot of relevant information. If you find it hard to follow it may be a good idea to ask a friend to go through it with you or talk to FRG advisers on our advice line – you can find FRG advice line contact details in Part 3 of this advice sheet.

We have included the references for any legal and practice requirements in the endnotes which you can find on the last page of this advice sheet. For full details of all the documents referred to in the endnotes, see the references section also at the end of the advice sheet.

Note: "Social services" are now known as "Children's Services". This is how they are referred to throughout this advice sheet.

PART ONE: BASIC INFORMATION ABOUT FGCs

What is an FGC?

An FGC is a family-led planning meeting in which the whole family comes together to make a plan for a vulnerable child. This 'family plan' should address problems that have been identified, usually by professionals who know the child (like the social worker) or sometimes by the family themselves. The child is usually at the meeting (if they are old enough) and they may have an advocate to help them have a say.

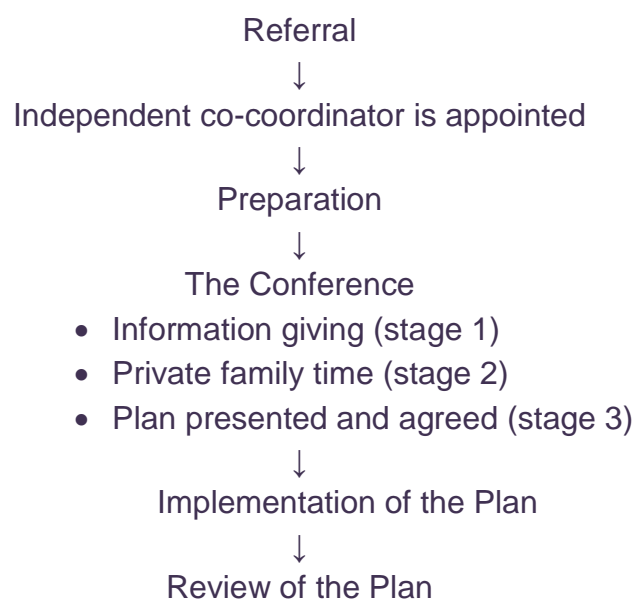
The meeting is arranged by an independent coordinator who meets everyone first to prepare for the meeting. Social workers and other professionals only attend part of the meeting to:

- explain their worries about the child and what needs to be addressed by the family in their plan (at the start of the meeting); and
- agree the family's plan for the child (provided it will keep the child safe) and confirm what help they will provide the family (last stage of the meeting).

But the family are also given time in private to draw up their plan which must address the concerns and make sure the child is kept safe (middle part of the meeting).

How does a FGC work?

There are different stages in the FGC model:



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1. The referral:

The FGC starts with a referral being made. The person who makes the referral is usually someone who works with the child or family. Different FGC services accept referrals from different agencies but often the referrer is a social worker, teacher, youth offending team (YOT) worker or health visitor. Sometimes families can also refer themselves.

2. Appointment of an independent co-ordinator:

Once a referral is made to the FGC service, an independent coordinator is appointed by the service to take on the case. The coordinator is independent of the social worker in the case. They are a **neutral** person. Their job is to help the family to plan for the FGC and to chair the meeting on the day. They will not influence the family to make a particular decision but they will help them to think about the plans and decisions that need to be made.

3. Preparation:

First of all, the independent coordinator makes contact with the referrer to clarify why the referral has been made and what they think the questions are that need to be addressed by the family.

They then help the family to **prepare** for the meeting. This involves the coordinator meeting the child, the parents/carers and wider family members and explaining to them how the process works. The coordinator will find out if there is agreement for the FGC to go ahead

Who needs to agree for an FGC to go ahead?

The FGC can only go ahead if it is agreed by either:

- i) the parents or anyone else who has parental responsibility for the child (such as anyone with a residence or special guardianship order or Children's services if there is a care order in place for the child). This means that if the parents object but someone else who has PR agrees, the FGC could still go ahead. For more information about who has PR see FRG advice sheet on

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Parental Responsibility <http://www.frg.org.uk/need-help-or-advice/advice-sheets>; or

- ii) the young person themselves if they are aged 16 or 17 (or in cases of a child under 16 who is old enough and mature enough to understand what they are agreeing to).

Involving the child/young person in the FGC

The coordinator will also explore with a child/young person and their parents how they may be involved in the FGC. This will be dependent on their age and understanding. This can involve arranging for an independent advocate to help the child/ young person to express their views clearly where this is seen as helpful.

If a young person under 16 does not want the FGC to happen, the co-ordinator will need to discuss with the family whether it would be useful to have the FGC without the child being present. This would enable the family to at least plan how they can work together to try to meet the young person's needs.

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Who is invited to the FGC?

It is up to the parents/carers/others with parental responsibility, to decide who should be invited, rather than the professionals. Once there is agreement about the FGC going ahead, the co-coordinator discusses with the child and the parents who else in the family network and which of the professionals who know the family should be invited to the meeting. Friends, neighbours and community figures who know the child and family may also be invited if their involvement is likely to help the family to make a plan and the family would like them there.

If there is a disagreement, for example between the parents, about who should be invited to the meeting, the coordinator will help the family to think about what might happen if key people are or aren't there. However, sometimes the child or parent may be concerned about being at risk of harm if certain people who have harmed them in the past are there. Although FGCs can go ahead in these circumstances provided there are effective and agreed safety measures in place, sometimes this

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may not be possible and it will be necessary to have two meetings or the person who is not invited can be asked to give their views in a letter or by other means.

Deciding the venue and other practical arrangements:

The coordinator will also help the family to decide **where** and **when** to hold the meeting and help them to resolve any difficulties in planning for the meeting. The coordinator will try to ensure that the meeting takes place at a time and a venue to suit the family. This sometimes means that it takes place outside of traditional office hours or at a weekend. It will take place somewhere **neutral** which usually means that it is not in a family member's house or in social work offices. The family will also be asked what food and refreshments they would like. The aim is to make sure the family are as comfortable with the arrangements as possible and that it feels like **their** meeting.

Meeting all family members invited to the FGC

The coordinator will usually meet with everyone who is invited to the meeting, for example grandparents, aunts, uncles, older siblings etc. They will explain to them why the referral has been made, how the FGC will work and any questions and problems that need to be addressed. They will also discuss with each person what ground rules they want to run the meeting (for example to remain child focussed and to avoid revisiting old arguments that may be unhelpful in addressing the problems) and if they have any other particular requirements.

Advocates for the young person and or vulnerable adults:

When the co-coordinator meets with any family member who is vulnerable (for example someone with learning disabilities or mental health problems), they will normally ask them if they would like to have an advocate at the FGC to help them express their views, and if so make the necessary arrangements.

Meeting the professionals to prepare them for the FGC:

A key part of the FGC is the information provided by the referrer (and any other professionals) about what they think are the problems for the child that needs to be

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addressed. Therefore the co-coordinator meets with these professionals (normally the social worker) to make sure they are well prepared to give clear information about this to the family including any 'bottom line' conditions for keeping the child safe and well-cared for (see next section). Many FGC projects will insist that the referrer provides this information in writing for the family prior to the meeting so they can begin to think about the issues prior to meeting.

4. The meeting:

The FGC meeting will take place in 3 stages:

Stage One: Information Sharing

The coordinator will start the meeting by welcoming everyone and making sure that everyone knows who each other is. They will then ask the person who made the referral (often the social worker) to share information about what needs to be decided. This should include clear, understandable information about what decisions need to be made and any '**bottom line**' that needs addressing.

A 'bottom line' means things that cannot be included in the plan for the child to be kept safe (for example the child cannot be in the same household as someone who is alleged to have harmed them). The professionals are expected to be clear with the family if there is anything that **must** be in the plan or anything that **can't** be in the plan. This information may also include what actions the agency will pursue if their concerns remain unresolved, for example they might start court proceedings.

Once the referrer has set out their information, the family are given the opportunity to ask questions and clarify anything that is not clear.

Any other person who is at the meeting because they work with the family (eg a health visitor or support worker) will also be asked to share any relevant information that they have. All of these 'information givers' will also be asked to outline what help they can offer to the family.

Once the family have all the information they need to help them to make a plan, the meeting will move into stage two.

Stage Two: Private Family Time

Families should **always** be given private family time to make a plan. During private family time professionals and the co-coordinator leave the room to give the family time to plan, although they remain in the building so they are available for the family if needed.

The family has **unlimited time** to discuss and draw up a plan which addresses the questions and problems identified by the referrer and that takes account of the 'bottom line' which has been explained to them. The family will be asked write down their plan.

If the family need further information in order to make their plan, they can call back any professional including the coordinator into their private meeting to help them. However professionals will only stay in this private time to give additional information before leaving the family to plan in private.

Once the family have made a plan they will call workers back into the meeting and move into the third stage.

Stage Three: Agreeing the plan

At this stage the coordinator will ask the family to explain their plan. They may also ask the family questions to clarify the details of the plan. The referrer is then asked whether they agree to the plan. The referrer ***should agree the plan as long as it is legal, safe and addresses the 'bottom line'***. However if there are ongoing court proceedings the plan would normally need to be agreed by the court before it can be implemented.

Professionals who are involved will also confirm what help they can give the child/family to make the plan work; this should normally be written down in the plan.

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The coordinator should always make sure that everyone who attended the meeting has a copy of the plan. Where it has been agreed by the social worker the family's plan should be added to the child's case file/electronic record as the current plan for the child.

4. The FGC review meeting

Once the plan is agreed the coordinator will ask the family if they would like a **review** meeting. These normally happen about 3 months after the original FGC but the timing should be agreed with the family in each case.

An FGC review is a chance for the family and professionals to meet together again to look at the plan and make sure it is working. Reviews give families the chance to make changes to any parts of the plan that aren't working well or need adjusting/developing to reflect changes in circumstances.

PART TWO: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

When are FGCs used?

Typically, FGCs are used when a decision needs to be made about any aspect of a child's future. Some of the situations where they are most commonly used are:

- To support parents who are struggling to raise their children
- To support parents and children where there has been domestic abuse
- When there are concerns about a child's safety and well-being.
- When decisions need to be made about where a child is going to live if they cannot stay at home.
- When decisions need to be made about how to reduce offending behaviour
- To agree contact with the family when a child is in care or cared for by another family member or friend.
- When there are difficulties with a child's education such as poor attendance at school
- When plans need to be made for a young person who is about to leave, or has left, the care system.

How are FGCs used in child protection/pre-proceedings cases?

When there are ongoing child protection concerns which have not been sorted out, it is possible that Children's Services might consider it is not safe for your child to remain at home with you. In this situation, Children's Services should work with you and your family to explore all safe options for your child to live with someone else in the family (unless there is an emergency).² This means ***it is really important that you involve members of your wider family as early in helping you make sure your child is safe whether they stay at home with you or live with someone else in the family.*** FGCs can be an extremely useful way of doing this. Government guidance says:

- 'It is important that wider family are identified and involved as early as possible as they can play a key role in supporting the child and help parents address identified problems. Where problems escalate and children cannot remain safely

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with parents, local authorities should seek to place children with suitable wider family members where it is safe to do so.’³

- Children’s Services should consider making a referral for a family group conference ‘if they believe there is a possibility that the child may not be able to remain with their parents... unless this would place the child at risk.’⁴

However, if there is no-one suitable to care for your child in your family or you don’t agree that they should move from your home, Children’s Services are likely to apply to court for an order saying they can remove your child (even if you don’t agree). To find out more about what happens when care proceedings are started, see FRG advice sheet: Care and related proceedings <http://www.frg.org.uk/need-help-or-advice/advice-sheets>

How can FGCs help to make plans for vulnerable adults?

FGCs are also sometimes used to make plans for vulnerable adults. They can be used in the following circumstances:

- In making decisions about older adults
- Where an adult has a physical disability
- Where an adult has mental health difficulties

Do children normally attend FGCs?

Practice varies between different FGC services about what age children need to be invited to their FGCs, but most will invite children over 8. Some projects involve even younger children.

The coordinator will spend a lot of time during the preparation stage helping children and their parents/carers to decide whether they want the child to go to the meeting:

- If they want to go but are worried about whether they will be able to say what they need to say, the co-coordinator will usually offer them an **advocate**. This is an independent person who goes with them to support them and, if the child wishes, to speak for them at the meeting. Most children do go to their FGC and the coordinator or their advocate will spend time with them helping them to think

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about what they want to say and achieve at the meeting and how they'd like to say it. Sometimes, if there is no advocate, a child is paired with a family member who can support them during the meeting and speak for them if and when necessary.

- If they don't want to go, but they still have things they want to say at the meeting, the coordinator will talk to them about how they want their views presented. This could be in a letter or by other means.

How are Family Group Conferences different to other meetings?

FGCs are based on the principle that families, if properly supported, will make safer and more relevant plans for their children than those made by professionals who don't have an in depth knowledge of their family.

FGCs are different because:

- It is the family who make the decisions, in consultation with professionals who work with them. In other meetings the plan is made by 'professionals' who sometimes consult with some of the family;
- The meeting takes place at a time and a place to suit the family and may take place outside of traditional office hours;
- Extended family members are invited to the meeting;
- Children are invited and play an active role in the meeting;
- The FGC will always involve private family time.

How is an FGC different to a 'family meeting'?

These two kinds of meetings are quite similar in that they both involve the wider family looking at options for alternative care for the child within the family when they cannot remain with their parents. But unlike an FGC (which is arranged by an independent coordinator and is family led), a family meeting is arranged by the social worker and is led by professionals and those present may not be the people the family themselves consider to be important. Families often report that they feel they have more say in an FGC than a family meeting.

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Am I entitled to a FGC?

No. You do not have a right to an FGC although you can certainly ask your social worker to refer you to one. Most local authorities have an FGC service in the area but if they don't you can still ask your social worker to refer you for an FGC on a 'spot purchase' basis.

However remember that government guidance says that Children's Services should consider making a referral for a family group conference 'if they believe there is a possibility that the child may not be able to remain with their parents... unless this would place the child at risk.'⁵

To find out whether there is an FGC service in your area you could talk to your social worker if you have one or contact your local council. You can also contact the Family Rights Group and check the website (www.frg.org.uk) which has a list of FGC service in England and Wales. FRG advice line details are at the end of this advice sheet.

Who is invited to an FGC?

a) Immediate family decide who to invite:

Decisions about who to invite are usually made by the child who is having the FGC and their parents or those with parental responsibility. Usually extended family members such as grandparents, aunts and uncles are invited. However, it does not have to be blood relatives. Some families will want friends to join the meeting. A general rule of thumb is to invite anyone you feel will be useful in helping you to make a plan for the child.

If there is disagreement over who to invite, the coordinator will help the family to try to reach an agreement.

b) Inviting Professionals:

The person who referred the family for the FGC is expected to be at the meeting.

This is usually a social worker. The family may also wish to invite other professionals

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who they feel will help them in making a plan. Some families choose to invite teachers, health visitors, doctors or family support workers.

Those who attend the meeting in a professional capacity will be expected to leave the room during private family time.

Our family argue a lot - can we have an FGC without private time?

Not really. The aim of the FGC is for the family to make decisions rather than to have those decisions made for them. Private time is therefore central to an FGC as it is a way of enabling this to happen. If those working with the family are permitted to sit in on the planning process they will influence the plan and it will not be a **family** plan. Private time is the best way of ensuring that the plan is owned by the family.

During preparation for the FGC you will be given a chance to talk about your worries and fears with the coordinator. They will help you to think about how to manage your feelings and concerns. If at any time during private family time you feel that it is getting too much for you, you are free to leave or to call the coordinator back in. You can also agree some ground rules for the meeting to help you to manage private time. Ground rules such as 'no swearing' can help people to manage private family time in a calmer way.

How will the FGC process respect my family's traditions and culture?

The FGC should be held in your language of choice and in some FGC services you can choose a coordinator from a similar ethnic background to you if you wish to. You can also choose the date, time and place of your meeting and the food that is served at the meeting. If you wish to keep to other customs and traditions that are part of your culture then this is usually possible.

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I'm not able to attend the FGC but there are things I'd like to say at the meeting. How can I have my voice heard?

People are often not able to go to the meeting because of work, travel, holidays, prison sentences etc. Also there may be those who don't want to be there but they still have views to contribute to the meeting. If you want to go but can't, for example if you live far away the project may be able to help you to pay for your travel to the meeting. Speak to the coordinator, who should be able to help you to get to the meeting or if not attending to have your views heard. There are various ways of doing this including writing a letter to the meeting, being available on the telephone or even using video/skype links.

What can I do if I have a disability which may prevent me from attending the meeting?

The coordinator can often arrange a venue and transport to make the meeting accessible for you. Alternatively it may be possible to hold the meeting in your home. If none of these are possible, you could write a letter to the meeting or be available by phone so that the meeting knows your views.

Can adults have advocates in Family Group Conferences?

Yes, in theory at least. If funding is available for this, some FGC services will offer advocates to vulnerable adults in FGCs. If you think you may need an advocate speak to your coordinator who will help you decide how you can be supported during the meeting.

What happens if my family can't agree on a plan?

When a plan is drawn up in private family time, it is best if it can be agreed by everyone in the family. In the third stage of the meeting the coordinator will therefore ask whether everyone agrees with the plan. The referrer should have informed everyone of what will happen if a plan cannot be agreed. If you cannot agree a plan, you may be given time to return to private family time or a chance to meet again.

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Where agreement isn't possible within the family then the different views can be accurately recorded to reflect the possible options available for the child.

Where the family have a different view about what is best for the child to the referring agency, then this can also be recorded. If there are care proceedings, the family can present their alternative plan about what is best for their child to the Judge.

What if I don't want to have (or attend) an FGC?

You are under no obligation to be at, or get involved in, an FGC. It should always be a voluntary process. However, if social workers have serious concerns about your child's safety and are considering starting care proceedings, you need to think about what may happen if you refuse to go. ***Once a case is in court, decisions are made by the judge and it may soon be too late for you to ask to take on the care, so an FGC can be a key opportunity for you and your family to take the lead in developing a safe plan.***

Even if your situation still ends up in court, an FGC will enable you to present your families' views to the court. If you wish to discuss this further, you can contact FRG advice line or take legal advice from a solicitor. See details in Part 3 at the end of this advice sheet.

How can I be sure about the standards of my local FGC service?

Your local FGC service should provide written materials about the standards it applies when working with families. This should give you a clear understanding of what to expect. If you don't receive this information you can always ask your coordinator to provide this.

Family Rights Group is the regulatory body for the administration of a national standards framework for FGC services. This framework sets out the national standards, clear expectations about how FGC services should operate and how their coordinators are trained and managed. This is currently a voluntary scheme for FGC projects, however a growing number of FGC services are now being accredited

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within this scheme. Accredited services will have a recognised logo demonstrating that they have been accredited. If you wish to know if your local service is accredited you can ask your coordinator directly. For further information about how the scheme works go to <http://www.frg.org.uk/involving-families/family-group-conferences/fgc-standards-and-accreditation>

Can I complain or give feedback about the FGC service I receive?

The standards framework sets out clear expectations that accredited FGC services should routinely seek the views of family members about their services and should take account of family members' views in the development and delivery of their services. If a service isn't accredited you should still expect that they ask for your views about the service. Your coordinator, usually when they first meet with you, should provide you with information about how to complain about the service or comment in any other way.

What do families say about FGCs?

'I think it was good that it was held on neutral ground, everyone was on a par with everyone else.'

'It's good to have food and stuff available, they were a good excuse to stop for a little while'

'We just got on and decided what needed to be done. The plan was much better and is still working'

'Families are experts on themselves and FGCs allow this expertise to be used'

'We know who does what in our family. Social Workers don't know what extended family can offer'

PART THREE: WHERE TO GET FURTHER INFORMATION

FAMILY RIGHTS GROUP: is an organisation which provides free telephone and email advice to family members who are involved with Children's Services about the care and protection of their children.

- Contact FRG's advice line for specific advice about your case on 0808 801 0366. It is open Monday-Friday 9.30am-3.00pm.
- You can also email to advice@frg.org.uk.
- You can also visit www.frg.org.uk/advice_sheets.html where you can download other relevant advice sheets.
- You can join the FRG parents' or family and friends carers' discussion boards.
- Family Rights group can also put you in touch with a **Family Group Conference Service**. Email office@frg.org.uk

See also

- FRG guidance: [Family Group Conferences in the Court Arena](#).
- Ashley (ed.) [FGC Toolkit – a practical guide for setting up and running an FGC service](#) (Family Rights Group)
- Ashley and Nixon (ed.) (2007) [Family Group Conferences: Where Next? Policies and Practices for the Future](#) (Family Rights Group)

SPECIALIST CHILDREN LAW SOLICITOR:

Contact a solicitor who specialises in child care law:

1. Ask your local **Citizens Advice** to recommend one.

Citizens Advice is an independent organisation providing free, confidential and impartial advice on all subjects to anyone. The address and telephone number of your local CAB can be found in the telephone directory. There is also advice on line on their website.

Website www.citizensadvice.org.uk

Advice on line Website www.adviceguide.org.uk

2. Or contact **The Law Society of England and Wales:** You can search for a solicitor who is a member of the Children Panel online at:

<http://www.lawsociety.org.uk/choosingandusing/findasolicitor.law>; or their

contact details are: 113 Chancery Lane, London WC2A 1PL Tel: 020 7242

Please note: The information contained in this advice sheet is intended for guidance only and whilst every effort is made to ensure it is correct at time of publication it should not be used as a substitute for legal advice or for individual advice about your case. Please also note that Welsh law is often different from English law. If you want specific advice about children in either England or Wales please contact the Family Rights Group advice service 0808 801 0366. © Family Rights Group

1222 Minicom: 0870 600 1560 Fax: 020 7831 03E-mail:

info.services@lawsociety.org.uk ;

3. Or contact **Civil Legal Advice (CLA)**: A free and confidential advice service run on behalf of the government. It provides information and legal advice directly to the public on common legal issues; helps people work out if they are eligible for free legal advice from a solicitor; and helps them find a solicitor if so.

Website: <https://www.gov.uk/civil-legal-advice> Telephone: 0845 345 4345.

If you are on a low wage, or on income support or job seekers allowance, you may be able to get free advice initially under the Legal Help Scheme. If Children's Services have said they are thinking of applying for a Care Order or they have done so then you will be entitled to free legal advice and representation, so long as you are the parent or have parental responsibility for the child concerned.

References

CA	Children Act 1989 http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/contents
Vol 1 Guidance	Children Act 1989 Regulations and Guidance, Volume 1 Court Orders and pre-proceedings
PLO	Practice direction 12A - CARE, SUPERVISION AND OTHER PART 4 PROCEEDINGS: GUIDE TO CASE MANAGEMENT

Last updated 31st July 2014

¹ s.17 Children Act 1989

² Re: B-S (Children) Court of Appeal [2013] EWCA Civ 1146

³ Statutory guidance: Volume 1 Court orders and pre-proceedings, DfE, April 2014 (para 22)

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/306282/Statutory_guidance_on_court_orders_and_pre-proceedings.pdf

⁴ DfE, 2014, Volume 1 Guidance: Court Orders and pre-proceedings, para 24

⁵ DfE, 2014, Volume 1 Guidance: Court Orders and pre-proceedings, para 24