

# African, Caribbean, Black Family-Group Conferencing Project (ACB-FGC): A Culturally Responsive Program to Support ACB Children and Families Involved with the Ontario Child Welfare System

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## Abstract

The disparate and disproportionate involvement of African American families in the child welfare system has been well documented, but research examining the experiences of African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) Canadian families in child welfare is emerging in Canada. In the province of Ontario, specifically, recent studies find that Black families are represented in the child welfare system at disproportionate and disparate rates. Experiences of Black youth, caregivers, and workers also highlight differential and punitive treatment within the system. These findings have given rise to the development of the African, Caribbean, Black Family Group Conferencing Project (ACB-FGC), a restorative, culturally responsive innovation to support Black families at risk of, or already engaged in, the child welfare system in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). In this conceptual article, we describe the community-based research that led to the development of the ACB-FGC model and implications of ACB-FGC for provincial policies and practices to address anti-Black racism in the child welfare system and among partner institutions.

*Keywords: African, Caribbean and Black (ACB) families, Family Group Conferencing (FGC), Child welfare, Anti-Black racism and racial disparity.*

## Introduction

Canadian research has increasingly highlighted disparities in the involvement and experiences of Black families who encounter the Ontario child welfare system (King et al., 2017; Turner, 2016). In Toronto in 2015, 8.5% of residents self-identified as Black and 8.2% of Toronto's child population was Black, yet 41% of children in care in Toronto were Black (Turner, 2016; Contenta et al., 2015; Teklu, 2012). Within the province of Ontario in 2018, Black youth represented 7% of the youth population but

made up 14% of children involved in maltreatment-related investigations (Bonnie & Facey, 2022). This aligns with an agency study conducted by Children's Aid Society of Toronto, which reported that Black children are five times more likely to be referred to child welfare than White children (2015). These differential outcomes continue for Black families after referral. For instance, given their representation in the population, investigations involving Black children were 2.5 times as likely to be substantiated, 1.7 times as likely to be transferred to ongoing services, and 2.5 times as likely to result in an

out-of-home placement during the investigation compared to White families (Bonnie & Facey, 2022). When comparing similarly situated Black and White families investigated in Ontario with respect to poverty and family-level risk factors, Black families were still more likely to experience deeper involvement in child welfare (King et al., 2017). The overrepresentation of Black youth in child welfare is also well-documented in the context of the United States. For instance, 14% of the general youth population in 2017 identified as Black, but they made up 23% of youth in care (Cénat, et al., 2021). Similar to the experiences of disparity for Black youth in Ontario's child welfare system, Black families in the United States experience higher rates of investigation than White families, and Black adolescents are more likely to be placed in out-of-home placements and for longer periods in comparison to White youth (Cénat et al., 2021; Huggins-Hoyt et al., 2019). While this study focuses on the Canadian context to contribute to emergent race-based research, it is significant to emphasize the prevalent patterns of disproportionality and disparity for Black children and families within both the Canadian and American child protection sector.

In 2018, a group of researchers, community members with lived experience of the Canadian child welfare system, and service providers from the Black Creek Community Health Centre (BCCHC) and the Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC) sought funding from private foundations in Canada and subsequently received a two-year grant from the Law Foundation of Ontario to develop a family group conferencing (FGC) service to address the negative, disproportionate experience of African, Caribbean, and Black families (ACB) in child welfare. In this conceptual article, we describe the community-based research that led to the development of what came to be known as the African, Caribbean, Black Family Group Conferencing (ACB-FGC) project and discuss the implications of ACB-FGC for provincial policies and practices to address anti-Black racism in the child welfare system and partnering institutions

## Literature Review

Canadian academic literature on child welfare has documented the root issues of Black children and families' overrepresentation and disparity within child welfare. The pathways are a collection of complex influences that include anti-Black racism within a colonial state, poverty, biases and discretionary power by child welfare workers, lack of cultural knowledge, settlement challenges, and procedural child protection policies and practices (Mohamud et al., 2021; King et al., 2017; Tuner, 2016; Teklu, 2012; Clarke, 2011; Gosine et al., 2011). Specifically, socioeconomic status was a considerable factor within the literature on the ensnarement of Black children and families in the child welfare system (Turner; 2016; Clarke, 2011, 2012). Biases related to socioeconomic status take place at different stages of the decision-making process (Clarke, 2011) and include a variety of Canadian institutions, such as schools and police, that contribute to overrepresentation of Black children and families by over-referring them to child welfare.

### *Intersection of Race, Gender, and Socioeconomic Status*

The interconnection of race and poverty, racialized poverty, is critical to understanding the overrepresentation of Black families as anti-Black racism places them on the peripherals of society (Turner, 2016; Clarke, 2012, 2011). For example, 41% of African Canadians under the age of 15 years old live below the low-income measure in contrast to 29% of White adolescents in the same age group (Turner, 2016), and 1 in 5 minoritized families live in poverty in Canada in comparison to 1 in 20 non-racialized families (Canada Without Poverty, 2021). Minoritized poverty also interconnects with gender within Canadian child welfare, as single-parent families are at increased risk (Boyd, 2014; Clarke, 2011). The *Child Welfare Anti-Oppression Roundtable* (2010) reported that 51% of families served by Children's Aid Societies (CAS) from April 2005 to March 2006 were led by single female headed households; however, the data was not disaggregated

by race, so the racial composition of the 51% remains unknown. This is crucial, as Black single mothers are subjected to persistent stereotyping as unfit mothers and frequently held responsible for structural challenges within Black families, communities, and the wider society (Clarke et al., 2018; Turner, 2016; Felix, 2017; Clarke, 2011, 2012). Race and gender within the Ontario child welfare system is noteworthy, as many studies have highlighted the power dynamics of child welfare workers, a profession heavily dominated by White women, in surveying and regulating Black mothers utilizing a Western conceptualization of middle-class norms (Clarke, 2012; Pon et al., 2011; Clarke, 2011).

### *Anti-Black Racism*

Many scholars and ACB parents and community members assert that anti-Black racism is an important factor in the disproportionality and disparity of Black families in child welfare (Mohamud et al., 2021; Clarke et al., 2018; Turner, 2016; Clarke, 2011, 2012; Pon et al., 2011). We draw on a definition of anti-Black racism developed by Dr. Akua Benjamin, a prominent social work educator and activist in Tkaronto/Toronto, who defines it as “a particular form of systemic and structural racism in Canadian society, which historically and contemporarily has been perpetrated against Blacks” (as cited in Mohamud et al., 2021, p. 2). This definition of anti-Black racism highlights both the history and current reality of systemic racism against Black Canadians as well as experiences of slavery and colonization of Black peoples of African descent in Canada. Furthermore, anti-Black racism comprises prejudicial attitudes and beliefs that are systemically embedded in institutions (such as child welfare, education, and the criminal justice system) in their organizational culture, policies, and practices that (re)produce barriers (Mosley et al., 2021; Hamilton, 2021; Gillborn, 2018). Child welfare academics and community members maintain that anti-Blackness is entrenched in Ontario’s and Canada’s child welfare systems, but it is cloaked by the concentration on micro-factors, such as personal risk assessments, that do not take structural influences into consideration (Clarke et al.,

2018; Felix, 2017; Turner, 2016; Clarke, 2011, 2012; Pon et al., 2011). Also, the combination of tools used by child welfare workers, including those that define eligibility for an investigation, the conditions that warrant intervention, and the obligation to report circumstances that present risk of harm, have lowered the threshold for reporting and raised the stakes for not reporting (Mohamud et al., 2021; Bergen & Abji, 2020; King et al., 2017; Turner, 2016; Clarke, 2011, 2012). For example, in 2013, half of the investigations carried out by child welfare workers were for future risk of abuse rather than actual current maltreatment (Bergen & Abji, 2020). We argue these tools serve to reinforce the biases and cultural misunderstandings of Black families that are rooted in systemic anti-Black racism embedded in Canadian society.

### *Impact of Child Welfare on Black Families and Children/Youth*

Research has documented how the surveillance and criminalization of Black families is comprehensive and detrimental (Phillips & Pon, 2018; Turner, 2016; Clarke, 2011, 2012; Roberts, 2002). Black youth in care have described their experiences of trauma, anxiety, depression, grief, and loss because of being removed from parents and separated from siblings and community (Clarke, 2011). Black children and youth have reported experiencing differential treatment, surveillance, and control within group and foster homes, which led to being funneled to the criminal system (Finlay et al., 2019; Clarke, 2011). Moreover, youth have lamented the loss and/or severing of identities, belonging, and connection to heritage as challenges that they had to reconcile because of being placed into culturally unsuitable homes and separated from their families, cultures, and communities (Edwards et al., 2022; Akuoko-Barfi et al., 2021; Clarke, 2011). Black parents expressed frustration and feeling overwhelmed navigating the child welfare system, often in combination with other institutions such as schools and police. Black mothers, like their children, reported feeling like they were under constant surveillance by personnel at their children’s schools,

CAS workers, police, and the court system (Clarke, 2011, 2012). They experienced these institutions as structures of forced compliance. Another source of frustration for ACB parents are the mandates enforced by CAS workers (such as anger management and parenting courses) for them to get their children back. Parents saw these requirements as further worsening their circumstances and not addressing factors such as unaffordable daycares/sitters, unlivable wages, affordable housing accommodations, and food insecurities (Clarke, 2011, 2012).

### *Restorative Justice: Family Group Conferencing*

To address these experiences of Black children, families, and communities, a cultural adaptation to FGC was developed as an intervention to support Black families at risk of, or already engaged in, the child welfare system in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). FGC is an approach rooted in restorative justice and was developed in 1989 by Māori experts in New Zealand to address disproportionality of Māori children in child welfare through the Children, Young Persons and their Families Act (Hollinshead et al., 2017; Moyle & Tauri, 2016; Metze et al., 2015; Malmberg-Heimonen & Johansen, 2014; Ney et al., 2011; Olson, 2009; Schmid & Pollack, 2009; Connolly, 2006, 2009). FGC is an alternative approach that allows family members to participate in the decision-making process to address the challenges identified by creating a plan of care (Asscher et al., 2014; Adams & Chandler, 2004, 2002).

The traditional model of FGC has five stages: referral, preparation, information sharing, private family time and agreeing to the family plan. In the **referral** stage, the family is identified and referred, with their consent, for FGC. Secondly, the FGC facilitator meets with all involved members individually to **plan** for the meeting at a neutral location. Thirdly, at the meeting, the FGC facilitator begins by introducing everyone, establishing the rules, and **sharing information** from everyone in attendance on their roles, concerns, and desired outcomes. Next,

the **family gathers privately** to discuss the plan to address the identified concerns as well as the roles for the family members in the strategy. The last stage is to present the **family plan for agreement** to the FGC facilitator and child welfare worker so that the family can implement the proposed solution (Devaney & Byrne, 2015; Metze et al., 2015; Healy et al., 2012; Olson, 2009).

FGC is strength-based because it recognizes families' strengths and resources, which challenges and disrupts the dominant hegemony that frequently assesses non-White families and communities from a deficit model. A focal principle of FGC is that families are the experts and, therefore, they can strategize for the well-being of their children and family (Adams & Chandler, 2004). Traditional Māori FGC principles acknowledge and endorse that children have the right to sustain their relations to not only families but also to their communities and cultures (Olson, 2009). Furthermore, the definition of family is extended to include kinfolks and community members that cultivate and care for children (Asscher et al., 2014; Olson, 2009). FGC is also culturally inclusive by recognizing "the context of people's own specific history, culture and environment to deliver services that are meaningful and responsive to their lived experience" (Sheets et al., 2009, p. 1187). Through power sharing, FGC empowers families to negotiate plans that are best for their families and sustains a minimally hierarchical relationship with child welfare case workers (Schmid & Pollack, 2009). The autonomy afforded to families enables families to feel and be empowered and with social support, which may expand their capabilities to be more resilient (Metze et al., 2015).

Despite the restorative possibilities FGCs afford to ACB families, the literature has also identified several fundamental challenges that potentially need to be addressed for FGCs to be effective with ACB families. For example, research has yet to demonstrate the long-term effectiveness of FGC, as most studies have focused on positive short-term outcomes, and comparative analyses using large groups are rare (Moyle & Tauri, 2016; Devaney & Byrne, 2015;

Metz et al., 2015; Healy et al., 2012; Ney et al., 2011; Schmid & Pollack, 2009; Sheets et al., 2009; Connolly, 2009). Moreover, through its entrenchment into dominant structures, which Moyle and Tauri (2016) refer to as the “mystification of restorative justice and the family group conference” (p. 88), FGC can be increasingly diluted as the service is absorbed by a Eurocentric and standardized process. Unequal power relations with child welfare agencies/workers are prominent within FGC literature, as this power imbalance presents a challenge to families’ decision-making abilities and contributes to further feelings of powerlessness against Eurocentric institutions (Moyle & Tauri, 2016; Devaney & Byrne, 2015; Metz et al., 2015; Healy et al., 2012; Ney et al., 2011; Schmid & Pollack, 2009; Sheets et al., 2009; Connolly, 2009).

In addition to identifying challenges, the academic literature has outlined several recommendations to improve the effectiveness of FGCs, such as establishing multiple mechanisms to address families’ multifaceted and complex needs (e.g., referrals for substance abuse, counselling for trauma, and legal aid for newcomers). Practitioners also point out that FGCs need to be personalized to families’ circumstances instead of following a standardized formulaic process (Moyle & Tauri, 2016; Devaney & Byrne, 2015; Metz et al., 2015; Healy et al., 2012; Ney et al., 2011; Schmid & Pollack, 2009; Sheets et al., 2009; Connolly, 2009). This necessitates creating and maintaining strong therapeutic relationships that include reflective practice and an understanding of historical and contemporary social and political context to fully comprehend families’ conditions. Researchers also recommend the utilization of longer and more frequent post-conference meetings as long-term support, as check-ins are central for families facing interconnected systemic barriers (Moyle & Tauri, 2016; Devaney & Byrne, 2015; Metz et al., 2015; Healy et al., 2012; Ney et al., 2011; Schmid & Pollack, 2009; Sheets et al., 2009; Connolly, 2009). Finally, to avoid FGCs being co-opted by Eurocentric, White-normed institutions to fulfil agency mandates, FGCs need to be community-based initiatives that are delivered by community

members (Moyle & Tauri, 2016) and, in the case of ACB-FGC project, recognize the multiplicity of identities within the umbrella of Blackness. We undertook the aforementioned adaptations through numerous conceptual frameworks that included critical race theory, intersectionality context, protective-factors, risk, strengths-based approaches, and social support.

## Conceptual Framework

Several conceptual frameworks informed the development and implementation of the ACB-FGC project. These frameworks, such as systemic anti-Black racism and critical race theory, delineate how race and racism (re)produce Black families’ experiences, engagement, and outcomes with the Ontario child welfare system. Furthermore, specific tenets of the conceptual frameworks, such as counter-narratives, challenge dominant discourses of Black families as pathological and dysfunctional while illuminating the experiences of Black families and service providers with child welfare. In this section, we will outline the conceptual frameworks that were instrumental in ensuring that the current model of ACB-FGC is culturally relevant and responsive to ACB families in Ontario.

*Systemic anti-Black racism* consists of organizational culture, policies, directives, practices, or procedures that exclude, displace, or marginalize Black people, thus creating unfair barriers for them to access valuable benefits and opportunities (Gillborn, 2018). Systemic anti-Black racism affects how Black populations access social support, so it is important for the ACB-FGC approach to be grounded in *critical race theory* (Veenstra & Patterson, 2016; Hall et al., 2015; Halwani, 2004). Critical race theory, which emerged from legal theory, centers on race and racism, particularly the anti-Black racism that structures the social relations experienced by Black people every day (Dei, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1998). This theory can help expose “racialization as a process,” how individuals and groups are positioned into hierarchies of power relations based on their classifications (Dei, 2013).

Another tenet of critical race theory is using narratives and counterstories by Black people to challenge the anonymity and normality of racism that is embedded within society (Dei, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Counterstories provide critique and experiences, known as epistemological knowledge, which can be used to deconstruct race and racist practices so that power is shared, as opposed to centralized within the dominant group (Dei, 2013).

Another tenet of critical race theory that the ACB-FGC project draws on is *intersectionality*, a framework developed by law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, to articulate the convergence of multiple forms of oppression related to social statuses and identities that produce particular forms of marginalization and discrimination for groups of people with multiple stigmatized identities, such as Black girls and women (Columbia Law School, 2017; Collins, 2000). An emphasis on intersecting identities and forms of discrimination makes visible how structural oppressions are multi-layered and complex. It is important to note that intersectionality is not intended to be a “grand theory of everything” and instead should be applied as a tool to visualize obstacles and thereby intervene effectively (Columbia Law School, 2017). While systemic anti-Black racism and intersectionality inform the circumstances of Black families involved with child welfare, *context* refers to the immediate physical and social settings in which people live, including structural and systemic barriers (i.e., policies, procedures, or practices) that unfairly discriminate and can prevent individuals from participating fully in a situation.

*Protective factors* can be defined as “a characteristic at the biological, psychological, family, or community (including peers and culture) level that is associated with a lower likelihood of problem outcomes or that reduces the negative impact of a risk factor on problem outcomes” (O’Connell et al., 2009, p. xxvii). Conversely, a *risk factor* can be defined as “a characteristic at the biological, psychological, family, community, or cultural

level that precedes and is associated with a higher likelihood of problem outcomes” (O’Connell et al., 2009, p. xxviii). Use of the protective factors concept is meant to highlight a *strength-based* approach that emphasizes people’s self-determination and strengths. It is a philosophy and a way of viewing individuals as resourceful and resilient in the face of adversity (Daniel & Jean-Pierre, 2020). Strengths related to *social support* are of particular interest; social support is available to an individual both in the form of perceived social support (the feeling of being supported) and received social support (where there is an exchange of resources) (Uchino et al., 2012). Additionally, types of social support range from informational (advice), emotional (someone to listen), instrumental (tangible aid), and appraisal (constructive criticism) (Cohen & Wills, 1985). All types of social support are important during large life events or transitions (Lee & Goldstein, 2016). Researchers have found an association between relationships and resilience (Drapeau et al., 2007; Ungar, 2013), as well as evidence on the importance of relationships and family during the process of transitioning out of care (Geenen & Powers, 2007). Social support is correlated with readiness to leave care (Benbenishty & Schiff, 2009; Refaeli et al., 2013) and with reduced need for help in the future (Refaeli et al., 2013). In brief, relationships are a key protective factor for determining how successful a youth is likely to be in the transition out of care (Reid, 2007).

## Adapting Traditional FGCs to the ACB-FGC Model

### Overview

Keeping the key concepts above in mind, ACB-FGC has adapted the existing model of FGC. In Ontario, traditional FGC is offered through a children’s mental health service agency. This agency is also responsible for training and certifying FGC Coordinators to work throughout the province. This model is not specific to ACB populations, and it has not been designed to address the specific

cultural and social needs and barriers ACB families involved with child welfare experience. ACB-FGC was adapted and developed in consultation with ACB families, service providers, and communities within Ontario, and it is therefore designed to be community-based and culturally responsive to ACB children, youth, families, and communities. Our model moves beyond surface modifications (e.g., language, racial makeup of frontline staff, visuals used in programming) and includes several key components: 1) recognizing culture as a protective and promotive factor by prioritizing Black cultural traditions and perspectives in programming; 2) understanding the Black community and addressing anti-Black racism by acknowledging and addressing systemic, cultural, and historical oppression faced by members of Black communities; 3) developing a culturally safe environment; 4) delivering services and facilitation with a critical equity lens; and 5) hiring knowledgeable and culturally representative staff.

### *Literature Review and Stakeholder Consultations*

The initial steps towards adapting traditional FGCs to the ACB-FGC model involved building a research team of professors, graduate students, postgraduates, and a community advisory committee (CAC) comprised of service providers and ACB community members with lived experiences of the child welfare system; conducting a comprehensive literature review, which was discussed in the previous section; and performing consultations in the form of interviews with members of the CAC and three groups of stakeholders:

- Academics who have researched and published about child welfare
- Black individuals who have lived experiences of the child welfare system
- Service providers/community advocates

The consultations ranged between 30 minutes to an hour, and the researchers took detailed notes.

Stakeholders with lived experience of the child welfare system expressed their concerns about how Black families are treated by system officials, while service providers shared their encounters with child welfare officials after their own children were referred. Stakeholders identified pathological discourses about Black families, who are being assessed through a Eurocentric lens that is endemic to both the education and child welfare systems. Additionally, stakeholders identified anti-Black racism, in concert with other identities such as gender, as the contributing factor of Black families being contacted by child welfare and/or having their children apprehended by child welfare. Many stakeholders cited the need for an intervention that would interrupt this practice of Black children being taken into care. While FGC is cited in the literature as a protective barrier between the referring party and the system so that the presenting issues can be worked out in this restorative justice format, some stakeholders suggested that, in addition to FGCs, wraparound services are needed for long-term support. Many stakeholders expressed the viewpoint that access to wraparound services is central to circumventing future child welfare involvement and other punitive institutions such as the criminal system.

Overall, four key themes were extracted from the consultations that informed the adaptation of traditional FGCs to the ACB-FGC model: 1) concerns about situations in which child welfare was called; 2) the role of the FGC Coordinator in working with ACB families; 3) education in mitigating over-reporting; and 4) the complexities of duty to report in influencing overrepresentation of Black families. Ultimately, the consultations ended up serving two adaptation processes. First, they supplemented the dearth of literature about Black children and families involved with Canadian child welfare systems and informed our understanding of the scope and complexity of intersecting challenges facing Black families involved with child welfare systems. Second, the consultations informed curriculum development for training modules for ACB-FGC Coordinators.

## *Curriculum Development for ACB-FGC Coordinator Training*

The findings from critical review of literature and stakeholder consultations were brought forth to the Expert Working Group (EWG) to inform the development of training modules for ACB-FGC Coordinators. The EWG, who met over the course of a weekend in February 2019, consisted of ten individuals with varying expertise in mental health, community outreach and services, and lived experience of child welfare working alongside Black families and communities in the Greater Toronto Area. The entirety of the planning sessions was recorded, and written notes were captured by the session facilitator. A post-session evaluation was then distributed by the research coordinator and completed by EWG members onsite.

The EWG members suggested that the overall aim of the ACB-FGC service must be to ensure the safety of children (or youth), and that this be accomplished through the leveraging of community resources and, where feasible, families. To further align the service to the needs and context of ACB families and communities, the EWG advised that ACB-FGC Coordinators should self-identify as Black or a person of African and Caribbean descent and should possess extensive experience working with Black children, youth, families, and communities. For the conference phase of the ACB-FGC, the EWG members emphasized centering the goals (e.g., child returning home, increasing access visits) and not the presenting issues (e.g., substance use), as well as providing space for families to voice their own experiences. Another recommendation is the need for ACB-FGC Coordinators to take on a more active role in supporting families to develop the plan of care, which contradicts mainstream FGC model, in which the coordinator is a neutral mediator. The EWG suggested regular check-ins and reviews with each family following the development of an agreement to the plan to guarantee that the family is supported after the conference. Based on the EWG's recommendations, the research team developed training for ACB-FGC Coordinators who would

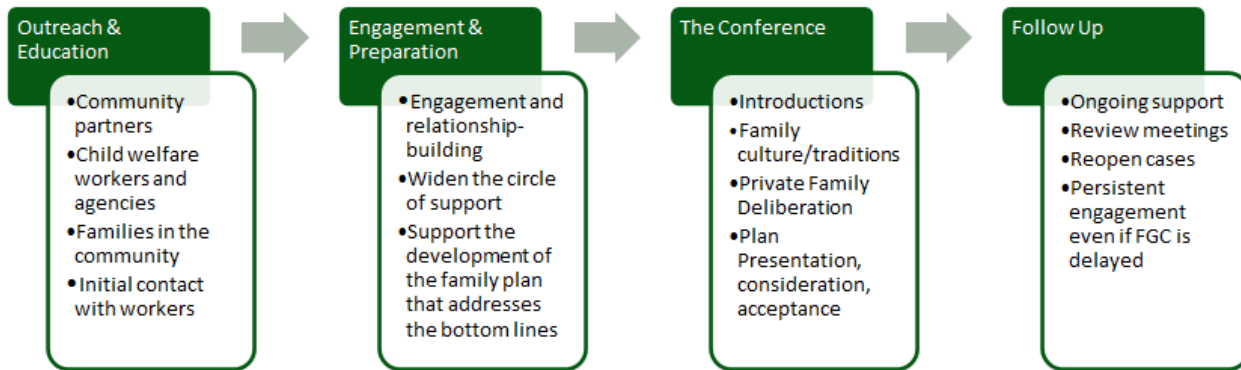
self-identify as members of ACB communities. ACB-FGC Coordinators, similar to traditional FGC coordinators, support ACB families to come together with significant friends and family members who are caregivers, as well as child welfare agencies and related service providers, in a restorative conference circle. During the conference, stakeholders craft a plan that addresses the child welfare concerns and ensures the future safety and well-being of the child. The training was comprised of four modules focused on: 1) the history of anti-Black racism in the Ontario child welfare system; 2) the sociocultural context of Black family life in the greater Toronto area; 3) working with ACB families and mental health; and 4) the ACB-FGC model of alternate dispute resolution. A detailed discussion of the training modules is beyond the scope of this paper.

## **Description of ACB-FGC Model**

Based on insights generated from the development phase of ACB-FGC, specifically the literature review, consultations, and ACB-FGC Coordinator training curriculum developed by the EWG, we adapted the traditional FGC model for use with ACB families and aptly called it the ACB-FGC model. We envisioned ACB-FGC serving any families that identify as ACB (including Indo-Caribbean families), with a focus on families who are at risk of involvement, who are being investigated, who are receiving ongoing child welfare services, who are at risk for future (not immediate) placement, who are at risk for kinship placement breaking down, or who are socially isolated and need connection to community, extended family, etc. The ACB-FGC model has four phases as depicted in Figure 1: 1) Outreach & Education; 2) Engagement & Preparation; 3) The Conference; and 4) Follow-Up.



Figure 1: The Four Phases of ACB-FGC



### *Phase 1: Outreach & Education*

The ACB-FGC Coordinator (subsequently referred to as the coordinator) does outreach to program directors at agencies serving Black families and child welfare agency supervisors to identify Black families either at risk of being referred to child welfare or who are currently involved. If the family meets the referral criteria and if the social worker, program coordinator, or their supervisor consider the family to be appropriate, the coordinator educates the family (with reference to relevant information leaflets) about the ACB-FGC model. The family should fully understand the process they are considering, including information about confidentiality, child protection, previous criminal convictions, and the availability of support services.

### *Phase 2: Engagement & Preparation*

The coordinator does a substantial amount of preparation and coordination before the actual conference. The coordinator works with the parents and the child or young person to decide who should be invited to the FGC and explores concerns they may have about the meeting and any of the potential participants. Preparation for the meeting also involves deciding on details of the family meeting, such as how family traditions and preferences will be built into the process. The coordinator prepares family members on what to expect and what issues

need to be addressed. The coordinator also contacts the professionals involved with the family to organize their attendance at the meeting.

### *Phase 3: The Conference*

Once the coordinator has reviewed the process and purpose of the meeting, child welfare workers present to the family, community members, and professionals the issues related to the child's care that have to be resolved or decided in the FGC. Other service providers may also share information. Family members are encouraged to ask questions, then are given "private family time" to discuss what they heard and develop their own plan to meet the child's needs. The family is asked to identify resources and supports that are needed to effectively implement their plan. In some cases, when asked, the coordinator can help facilitate conversations amongst family members, friends, and supporters. Once the family plan is developed, child welfare workers and other professionals rejoin the family meeting to hear and discuss the proposed plan. Professionals can ask questions, make suggestions, or request clarification. They may be asked to commit to providing services to support the family plan. The child welfare worker has responsibility for making sure that the proposed plan addresses concerns about the physical and emotional safety of the child. Once the plan is approved, everyone who was at the conference typically receives a copy of the plan, which specifies

what everyone has agreed to. In general, the delegated child welfare worker is responsible for checking that the plan is implemented as outlined and assessing how well it is working, but they are also accountable to the agreements they made during the conference. For example, during an FGC, the family plan sets out the tasks that need to be achieved before the child is returned home, and the worker and supervisor agree to that plan. Once those tasks are completed, the worker and their supervisor are accountable to that agreement, and the child is expected to return home. Plans often also identify family members who will help with monitoring or support, which helps to ensure agreement from the worker and supervisor. Plans cover a specified period of time (e.g., six months), and their effectiveness is typically reviewed by child welfare workers before extensions are granted.

#### *Phase 4: Follow-Up*

As previously mentioned, during the development phase of ACB-FGC model, several stakeholders we spoke with felt it was important for coordinators to “check-in” or follow up with them after the conference to see if any new situations or needs had arisen that were affecting families executing the plan. For this reason, the ACB-FGC model has a Follow-Up phase in which the ACB-FGC Coordinator continues to engage with Black families who need ongoing support related to persistent health and well-being needs, new challenging circumstances, or unexpected changes in interpersonal or relational support. In some situations, a case may even need to be reopened and a new plan devised in light of the new factors.

#### **Discussion**

We began this community-based project by asking: What does a culturally relevant and responsive FGC model for ACB families at risk of, or already engaged in, the child welfare system entail? A central principle that guided ACB-FGC, related to this question, is an ongoing relationship between ACB families, service providers, community members,

and scholars to inform the development and implementation of the program. Thus, to support and encourage other Black communities seeking to develop and implement restorative justice initiatives, it is critical to embed the FGC project in ACB communities, which means working with and alongside ACB families, community members, service providers, and researchers. This ensures that the intervention is grounded in the ongoing lived context of the ACB community, as well as utilizing their knowledge, strengths, and skills, to ensure relevance and applicability of the restorative justice program. Furthermore, while there are similarities in ACB families’ experiences within the child welfare systems across geographical locations (e.g., such as systemic anti-Black racism that contributes to the overrepresentation of Black families in care), there are divergences and nuances that need to be unearthed and taken into consideration when designing and implementing FGCs in respective locales.

The ACB-FGC, piloted in 2019-2021, is now in its third year of operation. A detailed discussion of the evaluation of the model is beyond the scope of this article. However, in conclusion, we want to emphasize that ACB-FGC is a unique, made-in-Ontario model that provides an example of a culturally adapted intervention to address deep child welfare involvement for ACB families overrepresented in the system. Specifically, based on the New Zealand model, the ACB-FGC in Ontario was designed by Black researchers at the University of Toronto in partnership with members of the Black community and is implemented by Black clinicians. This partnership with Black communities has also been formalized into a CAC that ensures the program continues to be accountable to the community it serves, a feature absent from most other child welfare interventions, including the traditional FGC program implemented in Ontario. Similarly, while all FGCs are intended to engage in a collaborative development of the plans, in order to engage diverse family members, the ACB-FGC initiative also includes a rolling evaluation through family interviews, so every family gets to provide

direct feedback on their experience. This evaluation approach ensures that ACB-FGC is constantly measuring the impact to reduce disparities in child welfare involvement for ACB communities.

As noted above, FGC originated to address disproportionalities in child welfare involvement for Indigenous children in New Zealand. In Ontario, FGC is used in child welfare as a form of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR). As described in the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services provincial policy directive *CW 005-06* (2018), ADR is “a strategy to streamline court processes and encourage alternatives to court” for child welfare involved families. Situating FGC in the context of ADR has several impacts. First, it means that FGC is exclusively used to address families that are already experiencing “deep” involvement in the child welfare system. It is often employed in circumstances where apprehension is being considered to ensure the child’s safety. As a result, there is limited capacity to implement FGC at earlier phases in the child welfare service spectrum. As noted above, earlier engagement has been discussed by families as necessary to successful program implementation and family outcomes.

Second, since ADR is offered in lieu of court processes, the delivery of ADR initiatives is guided by provincial policy directives with clear thresholds for implementation and eligibility criteria for funding. In Ontario, the provincial policy directive gives a single child and youth organization sole oversight of the training and hiring of FGC Coordinators. The result is a single gatekeeper for a program designed to serve families across Ontario. The impact is that the evidence-based model discussed in this paper is ineligible for recognition and provincial funding in Ontario. Moreover, an intervention that was explicitly designed to address disparities in child welfare involvement for minoritized populations is now being delivered entirely by a mainstream, White-led organization. Child welfare policies are often designed to ensure consistency in service delivery across the service spectrum. However, in Ontario, the policies have created barriers to

implementing initiatives that speak to the direct needs of the client community. Policy design in child welfare needs to consider the evolving needs of communities and both offer flexibility in the policies and undergo regular evaluations to ensure they are meeting the outcomes intended.

## Conclusion

This conceptual article delineates community-based research that led to the development and implementation of the ACB-FGC project that is culturally relevant and responsive to ACB families engaged in the child welfare system in Ontario. ACB families’ experiences and engagement within the Ontario child welfare system are unique because of deeply entrenched intersectional systemic anti-Black racism, which necessitated an intervention that recognizes the importance of including the voices, knowledges, and expertise of ACB families, service providers, community members, and researchers in all aspects of the project. Through the course of development and implementation, we learned the complexities of ACB families at risk of, or already involved, in child welfare, who require ongoing wraparound services and advocacy, which do not align with traditional FGC services. However, these are significant components to the wellbeing and maintenance of ACB families, which has meant breaking down silos and creating networks to better connect organizations that serve Black families/communities with the intent of generating wraparound support.

Also, we learned the importance of advocacy by FGC Coordinators and community as well as policy changes that could make this model more accessible to Black families and ensure the long-term stability of the service. We hope this project prompts more research into restorative justice interventions designed to serve minoritized families within the child welfare system and evaluations of these services to corroborate their effectiveness in delivering their stated outcomes, especially for minority families. Particularly for FGCs, an understanding of how race impacts access, involvement, and outcomes is

underdeveloped in the literature. Further research and regular evaluations, alongside collaboration with local ACB community members (e.g., families, service providers, researchers) and equitable ADR policy directives, are critical to redressing the overrepresentation and disparity of Black families

within the child welfare system. We conclude by reaffirming our main argument that restorative justice models, such as FGCs, in respective locales need to be rooted in ACB communities and driven by evidence to continuously consider and address the ongoing needs of ACB families and communities.

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