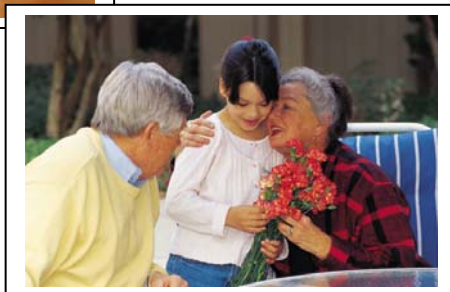
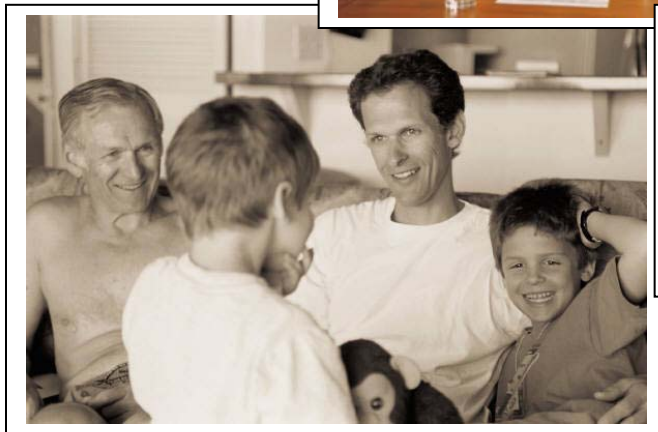
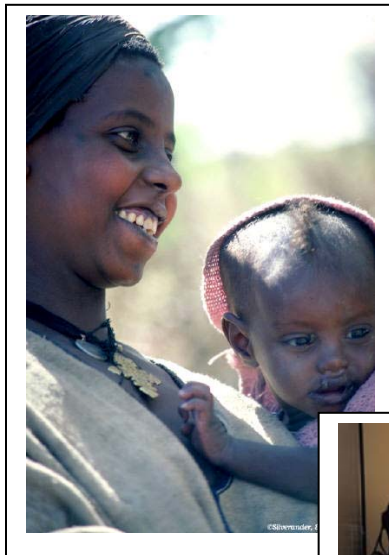


**STATE OF MISSISSIPPI**  
**Division Of Family And Children's Services**

**Guide For Families And Community Partners**

**To Family Centered County  
Conferences**



## **Table of Contents**

<b>PURPOSE AND USE OF THIS PRACTICE GUIDE .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>POSITION STATEMENT REGARDING FAMILY CENTERED PRACTICE .....</b>	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
<b>OVERVIEW OF THE COUNTY CONFERENCE.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>MEETING PLANNING AND PARTICIPATION.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>TIPS FOR ENSURING EFFECTIVE COUNTY CONFERENCES .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>PROCEDURES RELATED TO COUNTY CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS .....</b>	<b>16</b>

## **Purpose and Use of This Practice Guide**

*The intent of this Practice Guide is to assist families and community partners in understanding the process of family-centered county conferences.*

We suggest that you review this document prior to attending County Conferences. There are phrases and questions within this document that may be posed to you that could be helpful as you attend the County Conference.

This County Conference Concise Guide includes:

- 1) Family centered practice principles
- 2) Case stories to exemplify application of practice
- 3) The required agency procedures and process related to the County Conference.

We thank you for your involvement in the County Conference process and your commitment and dedication to the children and families of Mississippi.

## **Position Statement Regarding Family Centered Practice**

Mississippi's Division of Family and Children's Services is embarking on the development of a family centered practice framework that will guide and enhance child welfare practice. Family centered philosophy is a strength-based way of viewing families. It maintains that all families have strengths and it is up to us to help families identify and use these strengths to find solutions and resolve family issues. It is our belief that families can change. Families deserve respect and need to be partners in decision-making and the change process.

Some of the basic components of family-centered practice that guide the facilitation of County Conferences include:

- Families most often have the information needed to make decisions affecting them. They should, in most cases, be the core decision-makers.
- We will make active efforts to reunify children with parents or to expedite other permanency goals.
- There is a need to create and support consistency between the courts and DFCS in order to achieve the same goals within the context of family-centered practice.
- Our efforts reflect a sense of urgency to achieve timely permanency for children in foster care, reflecting their need for the security and stability of being with a family.
- All children should be afforded the same opportunity for positive outcomes, meaning there should be consistency between court practices and DCFS practices statewide.

## Overview of the County Conference

Mississippi implemented a family team conferencing model in 2001, which is referred to as the County Conference. **The County Conference is a family conferencing approach to bring the family, caseworker, area social work supervisor, and involved community providers together to assess progress and make decisions necessary to achieve timely permanency.** The County Conference is held on all custody cases within 6 months after entering custody and within every six months thereafter, throughout the life of the case. The County Conference serves as the six month administrative periodic review.

The County Conference is a method for engaging families and children in case planning for more timely permanency on custody cases. The County Conference does not replace nor substitute for the family team meetings held by the caseworker, but should serve to strengthen and support this practice with the family. The caseworkers and area social work supervisors will still be responsible for convening family team meetings to develop the initial Individualized Service Plan (ISP) within 30 calendar days from opening the case. The case is considered opened when the Area Social Work Supervisor (ASWS) approves the recommendations in MACWIS for continuing services of case assignment to develop the initial service plan. Additional family team meetings will be held based on the judgment of the supervisor and caseworker and based on the individual needs of the family and child(ren).

The County Conference will be enhanced to be a more family centered approach to support and engage the families in the decision-making process. In order to make the County Conference more family centered, participation by all involved parties will be expected and family participation will not be automatically limited but instead will be based on the individual family situation and needs. Social workers and supervisors will continue to participate in the County Conference which provides additional opportunities to review, update, and revise the permanency plan and case plan activities based on the family's input and progress. The family may include any family members and or support persons that the family identifies and wants involved in the on-going decision-making and review process (Please reference page 13 for procedures for No Contact Court Orders). The child(ren) in custody are included regardless of age and appropriate arrangements for the County Conference are made based on the individual child's needs. Other service providers, community team members and partners are also invited and included in this conference.

A County Conference standard practice has been to provide a client satisfaction survey to family members, foster children and community partners attending the County Conference. The survey can be completed immediately or can be completed and returned at a later date. The family members or community partners can provide identifying information or submit their comments anonymously. This practice will continue and the results will be utilized to continuously improve the process. The results of these surveys

will continue to be reported as part of the Foster Care Review Program Quarterly and Annual Report.

The primary emphasis of family team meetings and the County Conference is the safety of the child and family. Families will be engaged in developing their own plans and in decision-making with the focus being to keep the child safe. There will also be a strong emphasis on flexibility to fit the diverse needs of families encountered by DFCS staff.

Effective use of family team meetings and the County Conference will lead to improved child and family outcomes. Families will be more engaged and involved in case planning and decision-making. Families can help find solutions and develop alternative plans to help maintain family connections. Well-being will improve since there will be greater opportunity to assess and plan services to meet the individual family needs. Children will have a greater say in their case plans. Children will have more frequent visits with parents and siblings by utilizing the family team meetings and County Conference opportunities for additional visitation. By focusing more attention on routine review of permanency plans with the child(ren) and families, permanency goals should be achieved more timely.

## **Practice Principles for the Family Centered County Conference**

### **Practice Statement #1**

**We support and reinforce engagement of families in the decision making process through the County Conference:**

- We are honest with families.
- We practice full disclosure.
- We protect confidentiality and do not use confidentiality inappropriately as an excuse to avoid dealing with the difficult issues but instead get past our own discomfort level and openly problem solve with participants
- We let the families know why they are involved, what needs to happen, and consequences if they do not achieve goals.
- We actively seek family interaction and request information to engage families in the decision-making process
- We communicate clearly not using professional jargon or acronyms but instead use language easy to understand
- We have to seek to understand family's differences and the decisions about parenting ...and remember families can tell if they are respected.

### **Case Example:** *Support and reinforcement of family engagement in decision-making as part of the County Conference*

A county conference was conducted one case where the history of internal family conflict was well documented. It was apparent that these family conflicts were hindering the progress of the permanency plan for the child. After introductions were made at the beginning of the county conference, the Facilitator began by acknowledging the history of conflict but stressed that each person is an important part of the child's life that needs to be involved in the county conference process. The Facilitator informed each participant that they would be given an opportunity to speak and ask questions and that the conference comments would document everyone's input as a part of the child's case record and as a part of the report to the Youth Court. Ground rules were established: speaking one at a time, focusing the conversation on the facts related to the present situation (the child being in foster care) and not the conflicts that have occurred in the family's past, and not using profanity or name calling. The Facilitator stated to the family during the introductory course of the conference that they could be assured one thing—that each person would have their opportunity to speak and that their comments would be documented in the case record. The Facilitator showed the group that preparations had been made to do her best to help them reach a solution that will lead to permanency for the child. The Facilitator assured the participants that the meeting would not be over until everyone had the opportunity to make their comments, and that Family and Children's Services staff, including the Facilitator, would work past 5:00 if necessary. The Facilitator also assured the participants that after all persons had an opportunity to speak that there would be a time for additional comments if they wished to speak again.

The conference was facilitated by encouraging communication, asking pertinent questions related to the child's safety, well being, and permanency, and redirecting interruptions or irrelevant topics while still allowing full involvement by all participants. The conference lasted for over three hours however, each person in the group (8) had their opportunity to speak while the others listened. This level of participation by the family was a first for them who for months had been in chaos and whose interactions most often lead to emotional confrontations.

## **Practice Statement #2**

**We believe that the family has solutions to their own problems. We search for ways to hear their voice in case planning and in the County Conference case review process:**

Families and workers need to define success in the same way—otherwise how can the family know and understand where they are going? This co-definition should occur during the Family Team Meeting as part of the development of the initial ISP and be reinforced and supported in the County Conference by the Administrative Reviewer.

- Families most often have the information needed to make decisions affecting them. We need to ask the families what they think...and they should, in most cases, be the core decision-makers.
- We need to find ways to help parents raise their children –we look for ways for families to stay together safely.
  - We give families back the power to make decisions about their lives.
- We need to find ways to help parents raise their children –we look for ways for families to stay together safely.
- The plan that is developed is an ongoing living document. The Administrative Reviewer guides the workers and families in a discussion to review and update the plan to ensure it is accurate, current, and timely.
- We view the County Conference as an opportunity to interact with the family to listen to their concerns and comments.
- We acknowledge the value of the family's involvement in decision-making and ensure their input is communicated to agency staff and the courts.
- We facilitate the review of progress toward the permanency goals. We see if the plan is on target to achieve success.
- The plan is directly related to the reason for intervention with this family.
  - We use the strengths as a foundation for actual service planning.
  - We identify what success looks like (in the area that caused us to be in the home) ---and then we prioritize the specific services and activities that are **critical to mitigating the need.**
  - The family tells us what they need most.
- The county caseworker will ensure that members of the County Conference have a copy of the most recent adult and child ISP---and each participant understands their role in assessing the efficacy of the plan.



- Children need to be involved in all case planning about their lives regardless of age but the level and appropriateness of involvement is adjusted based on the child's capacity and individual needs.
- The County Conference has a clear purpose— to assess progress toward the permanent plan and that it is explicitly linked to the reason that the children are in care.
- Occurrences that may result in revisions or updating a case plan as part of the County Conference:
  - *Any unplanned move of the child*
  - *A change in permanency goals or options*
  - *Identified needs of a foster or adoptive placement resource that if not addressed could lead to a placement disruption*
  - *New or additional identified needs of the family requiring services or intervention that have not previously been addressed*
  - *The family is not making progress toward the definition of “success”*
  - *The family has made progress and complied with the expectations related to services*

**Case Example:** *How the administrative reviewer sets the environment of the county conference so the family feels safe and comfortable to voice their concerns or comments.*

Prior to the conference, the Facilitator determined what room the meeting was to be held in and ensured adequate seating for everyone. The Facilitator introduced herself, explained the purpose of the meeting, and emphasized that everyone should discuss any concerns and pose any questions they may have. The Facilitator gave the participants time to think and provided pauses of silence so that the participants were not rushed. The Facilitator made eye contact with the participants and repeated what was said to ensure that she was interpreting the information correctly and to be sure that everyone understood each other. The Facilitator engaged each participant by asking their opinion as to decisions that were made or voiced about the case plan and made all attempts to be as informal as possible to allow an open type discussion to take place by asking questions that generated dialogue. The Facilitator addressed any concerns that had been noted during the review of the case narratives and give validity to the case members by giving them credit for their involvement. The Facilitator ensured that positive aspects and strengths of the case were brought out during the discussion.

## **Practice Statement #3**

### **We Ensure Our Practice is Culturally Sensitive and Culturally Responsive**

- DFCS and its partners will ensure that our practice reflects cultural norms of families served.
  - It is our responsibility to ensure information is communicated about the child's culture with the caregivers in a sensitive and responsive manner during the County Conference.
  - The task of learning about the culture/religion/ethnic background of a family is to understand their view on such issues as discipline, cleanliness, hygiene, or housing and to assess how these beliefs/practices impact child safety.
  - We need to acknowledge that there are differences in beliefs due to where children are raised and the economic status of the families and incorporate this understanding into our case plans.
  - We make certain that the child maintains cultural connections and practices (religious, tribal, etc.)
- The County Conference is an opportunity for participants to learn about the child and family's culture and ethnic rituals.

### **Case Example: *Demonstrating Culturally Sensitive and Culturally Responsive Practice as part of the County Conferences***

Mississippi has long been a multicultural State, but the recent addition of Hispanic foster children has added the challenge of language to cultural sensitivity and responsiveness of the agency. A recent example included the mother of two children who has served as "translator" for her Central American common law husband for the several years that they have been together. Because the county conference is set up as an outlet for *all* participants to voice their achievements and needs as well as other comments, the Reviewer thought it to be essential that this Hispanic father was heard in his own words. By carefully listening and maintaining eye contact, the Reviewer was able to understand his words, which were restated to him to verify the Reviewer understood him. He expressed excitement and stated his appreciation of the Reviewer's efforts to listen to him. Furthermore, because the Reviewer had made the effort to understand him and to explain directly to him some cultural differences that would assist him in reunification of their children in their home, he stated his willingness to work with the agency on those differences.

## **Practice Statement #4**

### **We Seek to Maintain and Create Permanent Life-Long Connections for Children**

- Throughout the life of the case, we learn about kin so that if a child has to be placed, they are placed with people they know.
  - We need to continually ask families about maternal and paternal relatives, extended family relationships, and other family connections
  - We need to ask the children on an ongoing basis about maternal and paternal relatives as well as others who are not “relatives” but serve as family in their lives.
  - We need to find ways to help the family navigate these roles and the associated emotions that have changed due to the care-giving arrangement.
- The County Conference can support the birth families and resource families as partners in shared parenting and serve as a support and role model to both on how to work together for the best interest of the child.
- The County Conference can strengthen:
  - Supportive Relationships;
  - Sharing knowledge about the child’s needs, likes, dislikes, sleeping schedules, favorite foods; and
  - To discuss roles and interaction of all involved to ensure the child maintains connections
- Resource families are expected to assist in ensuring that the child maintains connections to those that matter to him/her
- Family-centered practice will reflect a sense of urgency to achieve timely permanency for children in foster care, reflecting their need for the security and stability of being with a family.
- We assist participants in exploring optimal connections:
  - Letters
  - Emails
  - Photos
  - Videotapes, DVDs, or audiotapes
  - Visitation
  - Holidays
  - Birthdays
  - Whatever else can be defined by the child, family and the permanent caregiver
  - Relationships with extended family do not have to end
  - Videotapes, DVDs, email

**Case Example: *The County Conferences supporting life long connections***

One of the participants in a recent County Conference was a non-relative who had been involved with the mother's family since at least 1987. This non-relative was married to the children's maternal grandmother's cousin at one time and had been asked by the maternal grandmother in 1987 to take her children while the grandmother was in jail. This non-relative worked for over a year to gain custody of the four children, one of whom was the mother of the children in this recent case, and provided a home for them until their mother was able to regain custody of them in 1989. This non-relative said that she wanted to provide the same stability for the children in this case that she provided to these children's mother and her siblings over fifteen years ago. A number of the children's relatives who attended the County Conference did not want this non-relative to be included but this non-relative had a life-long connection to the children and their mother; therefore, she was allowed to participate in the County Conference. After she agreed to (and signed) a confidentiality statement, she was able to contribute a viewpoint different from the other participants. This non-relative's connection to this family had also been recognized by the Court in that she had been awarded every-other weekend visitation with the children.

**Practice Statement #5**

**We Engage the Community in Taking Responsibility for the Well Being of Their Children**

- We serve as a catalyst for community organizations encouraging and helping them to build meaningful supports for children and their families specific to their culture and language.
- We cannot be all things to all people; we must share the workload with the broader community such as education, mental health, health and or faith based organizations based on the needs of the child and or family.
- We strive to create a common philosophy about the work that we do. This means that we are all educators about the importance of 1) helping families be the protectors of their own children, 2) community agencies being responsive and non-judgmental of families in need, 3) community resources being accessible, and 4) families being part of the community decision making process.
- The Administrative Reviewers support providers as collaborators in providing services to enhance the capacity of families to meet the children's needs.

**Case Example: *Demonstrating how the County Conferences supports and works collaboratively with community providers***

Some children in the state's custody have Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA). These individuals are invited to participate in the case reviews of the foster children who

are appointed to them by the courts. During a recent county conference, the Reviewer engaged the CASA representative in attendance to participate comfortably in the County Conference. After explaining the County Conference process, the CASA representative's input as to the agency's services and the community services to be provided to the family were solicited and welcomed. The CASA Worker's participation in the County Conference was helpful to both the agency and the family to determine further needed services to achieve the permanent plan of reunification for the child and to assist the family in achieving the goals of their case plan.

## Meeting Planning and Participation

Ground rules will be set to ensure a productive meeting:

- An agenda can provide focus and structure and help ensure goals are met
- The family is encouraged to assist in setting the rules
- No disrespectful language, behavior or negative tones
- No talking over another person.
- No cell phones or pagers during the meetings
- Unless it is an emergency—no one leaves the meeting until the meeting is done

An environment of participation is encouraged:

- Listen effectively and communicate clearly in a candid, constructive manner
- Participation is encouraged from all meeting participants
- Feedback should be used to maintain an open exchange
- Seek clarification of comments until the meaning is clear to everyone involved

During a County Conference:

- Actively participate
- Be sure you understand the rules of confidentiality
- Discuss the current situation
- Assist in setting goals
- Help the team identify and prioritize needs to reach goals
- Help the team identify strengths-based strategies to meet the needs
- Assist in creating a back up plan
- Obtain team members verbal commitment to plan task or assignments

After a County Conference:

- Understand that the conference will be held again within six months if the children continue to be in the state's custody.
- Meet with the social worker and assist in updating the parental and/or child's case plan

## **TIPS FOR ENSURING EFFECTIVE COUNTY CONFERENCES**

- 1.** Be on time. If you are going to be delayed for any reason be sure the county staff knows so other attendees can be informed.
- 2.** If the purpose of the meeting is not explained in advance, ask agency staff to do so.
- 3.** Be sensitive and respectful of the serious nature of the meeting.
- 4.** Be clear on the goal of developing a decision, with the assistance of the other participants that keeps the child safe in the least restrictive placement/least intrusive manner.
- 5.** Come prepared with ideas and recommendation, while receptive to the opinions and ideas of the other participants
- 6.** Be honest and fair in what you say. Discussion should be strengths-based, direct and straightforward.
- 7.** Assist in keeping the group focused and productive. Invite others to share their perspectives, information and opinion.

## **Procedures Related to County Conference Participants**

The county of responsibility **must invite** the following persons to the County Conference:

1. Parents
2. Child (regardless of age)
3. Grandparents (based on state law) Note: Grandparents who have the children placed with them must be invited.
4. Relatives involved or potentially involved in permanency for the child
5. Foster parents, or the caregiver with whom the child is placed
6. Child's guardian ad litem
7. Child's attorney
8. County of service, adoption staff, or agency of service as appropriate, if child is placed outside the county of responsibility

### **Exceptions to invitations:**

1. Parents who have voluntarily relinquished their parental rights (they may be invited but do not have to be)
2. Parents whose parental rights have been terminated by court action
3. Grandparents of children whose parental rights have been terminated or voluntarily relinquished do not have to be invited, but strong consideration should be given to grandparents to maintain the family connection when appropriate.

Written notice or invitations will be sent to the participants at least ten (10) working days prior to the County Conference.

### **Participation of Foster Children:**

All foster children, regardless of age, must be invited to the County Conference and allowed to attend.

### **No Contact Order**

If there is a no contact order by the Court of jurisdiction, the foster child must still be invited and allowed to attend the County Conference, but not the same meeting to which the parents, with "no contact orders" are invited. When there is "No Contact Order" the county social worker will notify the Administrative Reviewer prior to the date of the conference to schedule a separate another time for the child.

If the foster child and parents attend the same County Conference, and for some reason the child's best interest would be served by the child leaving the meeting room, the child may be removed, based on the judgment of the social worker or the Administrative Reviewer. If this occurs and the child needs to remain out of the meeting for any length of time or extended time period, the Administrative Reviewer may talk to this child privately to review the permanent plan, the goals and task of the ISP, and other relevant information to inform the child and allow the child input into decisions made.



**Parents**

Biological and legal parents (including putative/alleged fathers) should always be invited to the County Conferences. Once parents receive their own invitation, they may invite their own attorney to represent them at the review. When parents are represented by an attorney and the attorney attends the County Conference, the parents must accompany the attorney to the County Conference. The parent's attorney will not be allowed to attend the County Conference without the parent. They may also invite others to attend to support them during this process.

**Surrogate Parents**

Children with a special education ruling or children with an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) may have a designated surrogate parent, if so the surrogate parent should be invited to the County Conference.

**Grandparents**

Mississippi's Annotated Code, Section 43-15-13, mandates that the grandparents be included in the County Conference. Grandparents who have the children placed with them must be invited. If the parent's rights have been terminated or voluntarily relinquished, the grandparents are not required to be invited unless the children are placed with them.

**Relatives**

Relatives who provide relative placement for the child, or who are the focus of the child's permanent plans, or who the child or parents want to include, should be invited. They may also attend at the invitation of the birth parents.

**Foster/Adoptive Parents**

The foster/adoptive parents have a great deal of knowledge about the child because of their involvement on a daily basis and they must be invited. The foster/adoptive parents are not allowed to bring anyone to accompany or represent them. The foster/adoptive parents may attend the meeting regardless of the child's decision. Relatives who are licensed foster/adopt parents and the child is placed with them, must be invited.

**Guardian Ad Litem and or Attorneys**

No attorney should be invited except those representing the foster child. The child's guardian ad litem and or attorney is invited to the County Conference. The child and parent's attorneys are the only attorneys who may attend a County Conference.

**Community Providers**

Community providers who have direct involvement with the child may be invited to the review by the county of responsibility. Community providers would include, but is not limited to, educational providers (teachers, principals, etc.), mental health providers (counselors, therapist, etc.), health care providers (doctors, nurses, etc.) and other case specific service providers.

**Division of Family and Children's Services Staff**

Either the assigned social worker or area social work supervisor must attend the County Conference. Regional Directors may attend and participate if they choose to do so. If a child is placed out of state, that state's social worker should be invited to the County Conference. Social work interns who are actively working on the specific case may attend the County Conference. Other student interns may only attend the County Conference if the ASWS has provided prior approval.

**Preparation of the child**

If the child is placed out of county, the county of responsibility will request assistance from the county of service in preparing the child and foster or adoptive parents. Preparation should include a verbal discussion with the child in words easy to understand and should include the following:

- 1) The purpose of the meeting (to discuss plans for the child and parents)
- 2) Who may attend the meeting
- 3) The child's right to decide if he/she wishes to attend and/or participate in the meeting
- 4) Any concerns the child might want to discuss