ARTICLE

The personal is political: the restorative dialectic of child inclusion

Joan Pennell*

Abstract

The dialectic of the ‘personal is political’ is starkly evident in the lives of abused and neglected children and their families involved with child protection services. State intervention into families renders private matters into public issues. Restorative approaches in the child protection context offer a vital test of their efficacy in reshaping family and family-state relationships. Drawing upon the author’s experience as a young feminist and child protection worker, this article identifies three dynamics of the restorative dialectic: children’s testimony, women’s responsibilisation and child validation. A case study of a sexually abused teen demonstrates how the restorative process of family group conferencing transforms these dynamics. Children’s testimony of giving evidence in court becomes speaking for/speaking with; women blaming becomes collective responsibilisation; and child protectionism becomes validation of children and their cultural heritage. Together these movements uphold a relational approach to restorative justice that nudges norms toward greater equity.

Keywords: Child participation, feminist analysis, intersectionality, family group conferencing, child sexual abuse.

1. Introduction

The dialectic of the personal is political is starkly evident in the relationship of families and child welfare systems. Relating to one’s children is deeply personal and deeply affected by societal institutions. Child welfare intervention into the family makes apparent contradictions between the family as private and personal and...
the family as public and political. These contradictions have the potential to destabilise families or to strengthen their bonds. Child welfare systems destabilise families when they hold women solely accountable for their children, treat fathers as irrelevant or dangerous, frame children as charges in need of protection and ignore systemic injustices abrading familial ties. As Featherstone, White and Morris (2014) ask, ‘Is it ethically desirable to focus on rescuing children and leaving their parents behind in a society riven by inequalities?’ (p. 3).

Exposing contradictions between societal conditions and moral aspirations opens opportunities to restore relationships not to how they were but to how we want them to be. This is the essence of a relational theory of restorative justice based on an ‘equality of relationship, not in the sense of sameness but, rather, in the sense of satisfying the basic elements for well-being and flourishing’ (Llewellyn, 2012: 92-93). Restorative approaches in the context of child protection offer a vital test of their efficacy in supporting egalitarian norms within the family and with the state agency.

In my experience, restorative approaches present an opportunity for child welfare to reinforce family relationships, and this is especially the case when children are included in the deliberations. Child participants remind adults, both family and agency, to take responsible action on the youngsters’ behalf while attending to the children’s views and nurturing their capacity to make responsible choices. Restorative justice studies repeatedly report that including children and adolescents in the meetings helps them feel respected, cared for and connected to their family (Gal & Faedi Duramy, 2015).

My views on restorative approaches are particularly informed by my work on family group conferencing to address child maltreatment, domestic violence or both in Canada (Pennell & Burford, 2000) and the United States (Pennell & Anderson, 2005). This restorative process was first legislated in 1989 in Aotearoa New Zealand in order to counter Eurocentric child welfare and youth justice interventions undermining children and young people’s familial and cultural connections (Rangihau, 1986). In situations where children are at risk of entering state care, the family group is entitled by law to take part in the decision-making forums (Hassall, 1996). Of note, the family group includes both child and adult members of the immediate family as well as their kinship networks.

In accordance with the United Nations’ (1989) Convention on the rights of the child, the New Zealand legislation encourages children’s participation but permits conference coordinators to limit their participation if deemed necessary for their best interests or because of their level of maturity. Similar restrictions are applied by family group conferencing as well as by other types of family meetings in English-speaking countries (Nixon, Burford & Quinn, 2005) and reflect service providers’ hesitations about including children in sensitive discussions (Pennell, Allen-Eckard, Latz & Tomlinson, in press).

This article theorises child inclusion as altering the dialectic of the personal is political. Commonly the literature on child participation assumes that children are agents capable of voicing their concerns, making responsible choices and changing things for the better (Hartung, 2017). These assumptions are especially questioned when children have suffered abuse or neglect, and their families, nota-
bly their mothers, are viewed as endangering their well-being. Reflecting on these assumptions, I explore the dialectic set in motion by children’s testimony at the meetings, the redefinition of responsibility from an individual woman to a larger group, and children’s validation by the participants. I illustrate this dialectic through an example of a family group conference with a sexually abused teen. In keeping with the personal is political, I begin with self-sharing about why these three aspects of the dialectic stand out to me.

2. Personal recollections and political reflections

A young feminist in the mid-1970s, I joined a consciousness-raising group held in downtown Toronto. As articulated by radical feminist Carol Hanisch (1969), giving testimony out of our personal experiences helped us to realise that ‘personal problems are political problems’ (p. 1). In Hanisch’s pointed words, ‘Women are messed over, not messed up’ (p. 1) and in need of “political therapy” as opposed to personal therapy (p. 2). This realisation was both a personal validation and a call to political action. It was also a direct rejection of women’s subordination in the Civil Rights and New Left movements in the United States. Historian Sara Evans (1979) observed, ‘The ideas for the revolt were there: the importance of the personal; the need to change the quality of human relationships; the belief in participatory democracy and the importance of equality’ (p. 125).

During the group sessions, the somewhat older members of the Toronto group educated me about the intent, extent and impact of gendered violence. Although Hanisch and other radical feminists analysed structures of gender, race and class, I have no recollection in our group of linking patriarchy to other forms of oppression. Nor do I remember our mentioning family and children. These omissions may well have been a function of our being an all-White, English-speaking group of relatively young women who were emancipating from our families of origin. Moreover, I do not recollect my identifying these omissions, despite residing in an incredibly multicultural city.

A Black feminist lens would have given me concepts for analysing the intersection of oppressions and have pushed me to reach beyond my priorities to those of women from different backgrounds (Dill, 1983). Equally important, Black women’s theorising on historical oppression would have clarified the important interconnections for outsider groups of networking as sisters, nurturing their and their community’s children in making choices over their lives, and recreating norms to inspire positive self-valuation (Collins, 1986). Within the Canadian context, I later came to recognise that this dialectic interrupts preconceptions about the meaning of sisterhood and urges women to respect their cultural boundaries while forming coalitions on shared concerns (Ristock & Pennell, 1996). This means comprehending the complexity of multiple identities experienced at the intersubjective level, investigating the institutional arrangements constructing social inequalities and dismantling discourses fortifying historic oppressions (Bilge, 2010).
I do remember experiencing as a young feminist in Toronto a jarring disjunction between the women’s consciousness-raising group and my employment. As a recent social work graduate, I served as a child protection worker in a Toronto suburb with extensive public housing. My agency expected me to hold a caseload of largely single mothers accountable for failing to protect their children. As necessary, I was to turn to the court to impose requirements on parents or remove children from their home. Simultaneously, the agency expected me to engage with and support the families. The second expectation was reinforced by my social work education that directed me to humanist principles of accepting people for whom they are and supporting their efforts to actualise their potential (Rogers, 1961). Planning with my husband to become parents, I felt far more comfortable offering positive regard to my clients than judging their struggles!

On home visits, I drank tea at the kitchen table with women who recounted histories of multiple violations—racism, sexual violence, poverty and isolation—while expressing deep caring for their daughters and sons. Often their children and neighbours (but not the children’s fathers) took part in the conversation, listening intently and sharing their ideas. To my mind, these informal gatherings were just good practice in the social justice tradition of group work (Coyle, 1937/1939). With hindsight, I would also refer to them as a pre-cursor to family group conferencing.

Having the language of family group conferencing might have helped me as a young child protection worker to better integrate agency expectations of both protecting children and supporting families. This language might have helped me as well to define my stance as a feminist social worker. Committed to the work with families but emotionally drained, I frequented my public library to borrow (Anglophone) children’s books. I sought out fantasies in which the responsible choices and heroic efforts of children, supported by a kind fairy godmother, led against all odds to a happy resolution. After much perseverance, the fairy-tale boys and girls returned home with their wishes fulfilled and their accomplishments justly lauded.

The jumble of tales from the consciousness-raising group, the kitchen table and the library was both personally healing and politically unsettling. The stories were healing in that women, children or both were acknowledged and supported as competent and worthy of respect. These accounts were unsettling because of the disjunction among the norms constituting each type of narration: the gender-informed testimony of women’s liberation, the mother responsible of child protection and the child validation of children’s fantasy.

Today, the mother of three adult sons, I make sense of these disparate discourses by conceptualising them within a dialectic of the personal is political. For me, this means that personal interaction is shaped by past and current societal institutions and by anticipation of future social arrangements, and that these same institutions, whatever their temporal placement, are redefined by personal interaction. My early experiences in Toronto influence how this article explores the involvement of children in family group conferencing. The consciousness-raising group informs my analysis; the kitchen-table conversation shapes my
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practice approach; and the children’s fantasy gives me faith in the contributions of children and youth.

3. Children’s testimony in court

I begin by recounting my work with one family in Toronto. To this day, I remember sitting with a young, immigrant mother of colour and her 3-year-old son. I listened to the mother’s painful account of the sexual assault committed against her son and the equally painful account of his cross-examination in court. The little boy, huddled close to his mother, looked so sad, tense and lonely. These were the very same emotions reflected in his mother’s face. She was a newcomer to Canada and without family close-at-hand to lend support. Giving testimony in a Western adversarial court system is difficult for adults and even more problematic for child witnesses. In court, victimised children become alleged victims who serve as witnesses giving testimony. The defence attorneys are expected to raise questions about the validity of the children’s statements and undermine their credibility as sources of evidence.

Furthermore, the fairness of the court process is called into question when children’s testimony in sexual abuse cases is discounted for reasons unrelated to the case. Studies of community members eligible to serve on juries report that the gender of the jurors and the age of child witnesses affect perceptions of the victim. Adolescent girls relative to younger girls are more likely to be blamed for the sexual abuse; male jurors are less likely than female jurors to be empathetic toward and believe victims whatever their gender; and the credibility of older boys and girls compared to younger children is reduced if they appear to be unemotional (Bottoms et al., 2014; Cooper, Quas & Cleveland, 2014). The courtroom is a trying context in which to share one’s experience and express emotions.

Criminal proceedings rule out much of the experience of people who have been victimised as inadmissible evidence against defendants (Gal, 2011). Witnesses are instructed to keep to the ‘facts’ and not express their feelings about the violation and its impact. Children are subject to numerous interviews in advance of court and expected to repeat what happened as their memories fade, with any inconsistencies reducing their credibility in the hearing. Often support people, including parents, are not permitted to accompany children into the courtroom because they might later be called to testify as well. Moreover, if a female support person sits by the side of a girl witness, jurors are likely to perceive the girl as having been coached and are less likely to trust her testimony (McAuliff, Lapin & Michel, 2015).

Some advances such as screening the defendant from the view of the young witness or allowing videotaped testimony may help. Nevertheless, the original violation compounded by the protracted legal processes leaves many children feeling anxious and believing that they must have done something bad (Cooper et al., 2014). Child testimony in a family meeting can, although not necessarily, take quite a different course than in the court. In the courtroom, children are placed in an unfamiliar setting with unfamiliar adults. Conversely, the family meeting is
intended to bring together the children’s family. In the courtroom the child who has been victimised is designated as a ‘witness’ while in the family meeting the child is included as a ‘family member’. Witnesses have no authority to express their views about the court process or outcomes; family members, especially child victims, are key stakeholders with the right to contribute to the decision making.

Recognising the adverse impact of the court system on women and children, especially from communities of colour, feminist activists have pushed for law reform, community-based approaches and coordinated responses of law enforcement and feminist programmes (Ake & Arnold, 2018). Child welfare systems in different countries have also sought to create a coordinated response by adopting various forms of family meetings in which families, their informal networks and formal services reach plans together. If the case is before the court, the social worker with the family can present the plan to the judge for approval. Referral to family group conferencing does not mean that cases are necessarily diverted from juvenile court addressing child maltreatment or from criminal or civil court addressing domestic or sexual violence. As a result, the family group and the legal system can together exert leverage to prevent further violations.

Given differences in procedures across family meeting models, I narrow consideration to how family group conferences are organised and how these arrangements affect children’s communication of their experiences and wishes. The family group conference in child welfare has four main stages: (1) referral, usually by the child welfare worker, of the case for conferencing; (2) preparation of family group members and service providers for the conference; (3) convening the conference to bring together the family group and develop a plan of action; and (4) implementing the resulting plan and revising the plan as necessary. A conference coordinator is responsible for organising and convening the conference. Preferably the coordinator does not have case-carrying responsibilities; otherwise, the family group is likely to become confused about the coordinator’s role. Preparations are crucial for explaining the process, developing an agreed-upon purpose for the conference, inviting participants, conferring with invitees about guidelines for participation at the conference, making logistical arrangements (e.g. travel, selecting the venue) and assessing for safety and putting in place safety measures as needed.

The conference itself has four main phases: opening in the family’s cultural traditions (e.g. a greeting by a senior, saying a prayer), information sharing about the situation and possible resources for addressing areas of concern, family private time to make a plan with all the service providers and conference coordinators outside the room and approval of the plan by the involved protective agencies and authorisation of resources for implementing the plan. Practice guidance on family group conferencing is available (American Humane Association 2010; Burford, Pennell & MacLeod, 1995). I begin by discussing the benefits and risks to young people of sharing their stories, and then I turn to an example of one family group conference that reshaped the narrative of a sexually abused teen.
4. Telling personal stories

As foster youth have found, telling personal stories is a way to imagine and reimage our lives, connect with others, change stereotypes and inspire action (Casey Family Programs, 2014). At the same time, disclosing life histories runs the risk of awakening painful memories, feeling exposed or being discounted. Another significant risk is that our emotional stories may be exploited by others to bolster their own agendas.

For those in a position of power, telling our stories for us is a ‘means of gaining political purchase in adversarial debates … [and] can actively be used as a tool of silencing … invisibilising structural dynamics’ (Phipps, 2016: 307). These risks are all the more intensified for children marginalised because of their age, race, class, dis(ability), gender, sexuality or nationality. To make sense of our experiences to ourselves and to others, we need to place our stories within the historical and contemporaneous contexts in which they were constructed; without this intersectional analysis, we are likely to perpetuate social inequality.

An example is provided by Michelle Salazar Pérez (2017). Drawing upon her own story of childhood sexual abuse, Pérez applies a Black feminist lens to identify how White patriarchy intersects with other forms of inequality to entrap poor children of colour. Pérez observes, ‘Structural power embedded in legal systems in the United States and around the world is situated to “protect” children while at the same time denying them equitable opportunity to report and remove themselves from abusive environments’ (p. 54). Her analysis frames her lived experience, serves as a call to political action and validates herself as an empowered and thriving survivor.

5. Speaking for, speaking with

In child welfare, the primary purpose of a family group conference is not to tell one’s story, though this certainly happens, but rather to create a plan to safeguard children and their families. The plans may designate an adult to whom the child can turn if the abuse reoccurs. This is precisely what happened for a White, Anglophone adolescent who had been sexually abused from the age of seven by her stepfather (Burford & Pennell, 1995). Although the stepfather had been convicted and incarcerated, the extended family knew little about what had occurred. Her mother and stepfather planned to reunite on his release from prison. All this left the young woman feeling isolated, silenced and blamed. The conference was carefully structured so that the teen would not be expected to self-disclose.

The woman coordinating the conference had experience in both correctional services and women’s advocacy. In the lead up to the conference, she invited and prepared the three sides of the family – maternal, paternal and step-paternal – as well as the involved service providers. Family group conferences tend to include more fathers or their side of the family than is often found in child welfare practice (Veneski & Kemp, 2000). As part of these preparations, the coordinator met with the teen to assist her in designating a support person to stay by her and pro-
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vide emotional support during the conference. The young woman identified an adolescent girl who was in the same foster home and, at the insistence of the coordinator, an adult aunt, who could exert more authority at the conference.

At the conference, the teen elected to sit in an adjoining room to the meeting room so that she could hear and be heard without being seen (she spent much of the conference sobbing). The conference circle included two empty chairs – one for the teen and the other for her young support person. This arrangement offered a visible reminder of their presence over the day of the conference while giving some privacy to the two young women.

At the start of the conference, the police officer provided the details of the investigation, which he relayed in a factual and caring manner. This meant that an authority external to the family disclosed what led to the charges against the stepfather, and it meant that the police, if needed, were available to protect participants. Next at the teen’s request, the coordinator presented her views. The coordinator also read a statement from the stepfather, who remained in prison at the time. The reaction to the information was visceral with women crying and men storming out of the meeting and, in the case of one brother of the stepfather, vomiting outdoors. Gradually, though, women on different sides of the family retrieved their male relatives, chatted and laughed with the teen and acknowledged the stepfather’s responsibility for his abuse (something he had not done in his letter to their disappointment).

Then, with some reassurance from the coordinator, the family group settled into deliberating and making their plan with the professionals, including the coordinator, outside the room. During this private time, the group agreed that women representatives from the three sides of the family would meet regularly to ensure the teen’s safety, especially after her stepfather returned home. They also would work closely with the parole officer on the stepfather’s discharge from prison. At the meeting’s conclusion, the plan was approved by the child welfare worker and the teen. When asked what she thought of the plan, the young woman smiled and exclaimed that it was ‘really neat that 22 people in my family came together for a whole day to talk about me!’ (Burford & Pennell, 1995: 146).

For this young woman, the conference was both validating and healing. She felt believed and supported, in sharp contrast with the experience of so many sexually abused teens in court. She was not compelled to give testimony before her family group. Instead, she had the opportunity to speak for herself or to have others speak on her behalf, and most importantly, she had the opportunity to speak with her family and kinship network. Out of these discussions emerged a plan that the group created and afterwards carried out together. The plan included a relative to whom the teen could turn. Later the family group revised the action steps to meet the young woman’s changing wishes on where she wanted to live, first moving from foster care to her mother’s home and then to her grandmother’s home.
6. From women blaming to collective responsibilisation

Restorative processes can be misused to blame parents, especially mothers, for the actions of their children (Richards, 2017). Such responsibilisation keeps the deliberations stuck on past wrongdoing rather than on reshaping the future (Braithwaite & Roche, 2001). The conference for the sexually abused young woman redirected responsibilisation. At the conference, the vital leadership that women offered over the conference redefined who was accountable for the child sexual abuse and who would take charge of the family’s affairs. This transformed the personal shame of a teen, first into the collective shame of the family group because they had not protected their young relative, and then into a unified stance against the abuse. This is the emancipatory ‘politics of hope’ that is fuelled by the ‘care-eliciting actions of young people themselves at these conferences’ (Braithwaite, 2004: 10, 11).

The story of the conference is not about one young woman and instead the story is what the family group recrafted about themselves. As the case with other family groups, putting the pain on the table reunited them so that they could create a plan that safeguarded family members and gave them a sense of pride as a family (Pennell & Burford, 2002). This process shifts norms away from child sexual abuse as a private matter within a family to an issue demanding coordinated action of the family and protective authorities. Thinking back, how very different the experience of the three-year-old boy and his mother in Toronto would have been if they could have had such a community of concern wrapped around them.

7. Child validation

Would attending a conference work as well for young children as for teens? Often this possibility is not made available to young children. In some cultures, children speaking before their elders is considered inappropriate and holding a pre-conference with the children can be used instead (Pennell & Burford, 1995). In other cultures, the omission of children reflects adult uncertainties about re-traumatising the youngsters, embarrassing their families, managing children during a lengthy conference or negotiating logistics such as around school schedules (Gal & Faedi Duramy, 2015). Some programmes encourage the participation of children through alternative means such as children preparing a letter or audio-recording to be shared at the conference or placing the child’s picture at the centre of the conference circle.

Nevertheless, the limited evidence points to including children in person if there is adequate preparation for and support at the conference. A small British study asked children between the ages of 6 and 16 years about their experiences at their conference (Bell & Wilson, 2006). The researchers found that for the most part, the children and youth understood why the conference was being held, appreciated seeing family, wanted to take part in the family’s private time and liked the resulting plan. Another British pilot study interviewed children between 6 and 13 years about the impact of having an advocate with them during the con-
ference (Dalrymple, 2002). The children reported that an advocate enhanced their sense of personal power in a circle of adults and that they were better able to express their views directly or through the advocate. The role of the advocate overlaps with that of the support person (as used in the conference for the sexually abused teen) but differs somewhat in its emphasis on standing up for the child as opposed to sitting by the side of the child.

Including children from the conference provides opportunities for growth in three fundamental ways. First, during the conference, children can reconnect with family, and these connections are so essential to their sense of belonging and feeling cared for. Just knowing that their family group is meeting to figure out plans for them reduces the anxiety of children in care (Sheets et al., 2009). Anecdotal evidence indicates that children’s physical presence at the conference makes a difference to decisions on where they live (as was the case with the sexually abused teen). Comparative studies report that having a conference in itself increases children’s likelihood of reuniting with parents or finding homes with relatives (Texas – Lambert, Johnson & Wang, 2017; Kenya – Ottolini, 2011; Washington, D.C. – Pennell, Edwards & Burford, 2010). Although conferencing expedites returning children across racial/ethnic groups to their homes, this effect appears to be more pronounced for the African American and Hispanic children than for the Anglo children (Texas – Sheets et al., 2009). This finding is notable because more professionalised decision making expedites Anglo children at a faster rate.

Second, by being present at the conference, children see participatory democracy in action and learn about how to make decisions with others. Studies of conferencing in Newfoundland & Labrador (Pennell & Burford, 1995) and in North Carolina (Pennell, 2006) found that family groups during their private time reached decisions largely through consensus, following an inspiring leader, or bargaining. Manipulation during the private time was far less frequent and less influential, and when manipulation did occur, it correlated with the family group feeling ill-prepared for the conference (Pennell, 2006).

Third, children’s inclusion in the family group conference can be validating by itself. Children may feel not only connected to their family and a part of the planning but also praised for their contributions. Child development studies find that commendation of their efforts motivates toddlers to develop intellectually and socio-morally and the impact continues into childhood (Gunderson et al., 2013). These studies further report that little girls as compared to little boys, however, are more likely praised for what they are (e.g. being cute) rather than what they do (e.g. solve puzzles), thus, limiting their initiative to overcome challenges. In the family group conference, both girls and boys benefit from expressing their views and from hearing the important people in their lives take into account their wishes.
8. Child inclusion and normative change

The dialectic of child inclusion not only affects what happens during the conference but also sets in motion normative changes within families and in their interactions with child protection services. On first consideration, children who have suffered abuse or neglect would appear most at risk at a conference in which their family and relatives are present. Child welfare workers and other service providers often worry that participation will re-traumatise children and see their role as speaking for the children at the meetings (Pennell et al., in press). Giving testimony in court, though, seems even more problematic for children than attending a conference. The court expects children to relate personal information to adults whom they do not know and in a child-unfriendly setting.

Another perspective is that abused or neglected children are the very ones who would most profit from a family group conference. In the meeting, they are given the opportunity to reconnect with family, take part in decisions and receive validation for their perseverance in the face of adversity. Furthermore, the exclusion of children signals distrust of their families and cultural heritage. Certainly, the conference coordinator needs to prepare child and adult participants (including service providers) and in consultation with the family, to put in place safety measures. Family groups are frequently more aware than the service providers about how to structure the meeting. For instance, they may know which participants should sit next to each other or who should raise sensitive subjects. They also have good sense about what to put into the plans resulting from the deliberations so that all the family members are safeguarded.

Significantly, children’s inclusion shifts dynamics that I had experienced as a young woman in Toronto. The first concerns testimony. In the White, Anglophone consciousness-raising group, I and other members shared experiences that helped identify commonalities as women. To my recollection, though, we did not discuss what it meant to be a mother, a stage of life that I was shortly to enter. Here guidance from Black Feminists would have helped me in recognising the interconnections between sisterhood and caring for our children and our community’s children (Collins, 1986).

This brings me to the second dynamic of women’s responsibilisation. A Black Feminist perspective would have served me well in relating women’s liberation to my employment as a child protection worker. I would have more clearly identified how my agency expected me to hold mothers responsible for the inequality that they and their children endured. Such responsibilisation also extends to the sexually abused young woman in the family group example described in this article. To some extent, the families on my caseload and I created more respectful relationships and engaged in joint problem solving as we sat around the kitchen table.

What I heard, though, took an emotional toll on me as a child protection worker. My response was to turn to children’s stories in which the young heroes and heroines succeeded and returned home triumphantly. This recharged my faith in children’s pluck and good judgment. Thus, the third dynamic is children’s validation.
A family group conference that keeps to its intended purpose redefines these three dynamics of child testimony, women’s responsibilisation and child validation. In the conference, children do not testify and give evidence. Instead, the children speak for themselves or have others speak for them, and most importantly, they are part of a family group that speaks with each other. This shifts norms away from protecting children from their societally disparaged families. By affirming family connections and making plans together, the family group and the service providers move from responsibilisation of individual women to acknowledging collective accountability. This moves norms away from holding women solely accountable for their families. Included in the deliberations, children experience pride in themselves and their families. This pulls norms toward validation of children and their families. These three normative shifts are precisely the aim of a relational approach to restorative justice that seeks to redress inequality and affirm cultural heritage.

Children’s human right to engage in decision making within their family groups can become derailed unless reinforced at four interrelated ecological levels (Gal, 2017). First, within the conference, both family group and service providers need to encourage children’s meaningful involvement in deliberations to the extent to which children feel confident and competent to take part. Second, given that professionals serve as gatekeepers to participation in family group conferencing, they often require training on how to include children and direct experience with successful conferences in which children express their views. Third, the professionals operate under organisational policy and state law, and these regulations need to routinise children’s inclusion with any deviations from this preferred course demanding explication and justification. Fourth, the wider socio-political discourse needs to frame children as citizens, holding the right to engage in discussions with the potential to generate shared interests. The interconnections among these four ecological levels support conceptualising children’s inclusion within a framework of the personal as political.

References


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