

Team Decision Making Survey

2007

**Department of Health and
Social Services**

Office of Children's Services



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Highlights of Findings

This report summarizes the results of a survey conducted by the Department of Health and Social Services, Office of Children's Services, to solicit information regarding the experiences of families who participated in the Team Decision Making meeting.

The results of the telephone survey conducted with parents who participated in a Team Decision Making meeting held in the Anchorage Field Office between Sept. 7, 2006, and Nov. 30, 2006, are presented. There were 81 parents who participated in the survey.

Key results of the survey are listed below

- 70 percent of the participants indicated that the Team Decision Making meeting was a worthwhile process
- 82 percent of the participants reported that the purpose of the Team Decision Making meeting was clearly explained to them
- 81 percent of the participants felt that in their Team Decision Making meeting, the facilitator of the meeting was welcoming and engaging to persons who attended
- 80 percent of the participants responded that they were encouraged to participate and provide information during the Team Decision Making meeting
- 68 percent of the participants reported that they agreed with the placement decision for the child that was made at the Team Decision Making meeting.

Section I: Introduction

The Department of Health and Social Services, Office of Children's Services, is responsible for the delivery of child protective services in the state of Alaska. The agency coordinates the provision of services to families to insure the safety of children and promote their well-being. The Office of Children's Services works in partnership with families, tribes, and community providers to deliver services. These services are intended to enhance the parents' capacity to provide care for their children.

The Office of Children's Services began work with the Annie E. Casey Foundation to develop and implement the Family-to-Family Initiative in 2004. This program was developed initially by the Casey Foundation in 1992 to enhance child welfare systems by advocating for more children to remain safely with their own families or a family-like connection. The Family-to-Family initiative applies four basic principles: (1) that a child's safety is paramount; (2) children belong in families; (3) families need strong communities; and (4) public child welfare systems need partnerships with the community and with other systems to achieve strong outcomes for children. The Casey Foundation provided funding to the Office of Children's Services for training of staff to implement Team Decision Making in the Anchorage Region. They continue to provide ongoing technical assistance.

The Office of Children's Services, Anchorage Field Office, implemented the Team Decision Making component of the Family-to-Family initiative in February 2004. The Team Decision Making process involves including birth families, relatives, tribes, family support members, foster parents, and community representatives in all child placement decisions that are made after a family has come to the attention of the agency. The goal of the Team Decision Making process is to establish a supportive network for children and those who provide for their care.

Approximately 60 percent of the children in foster care in Alaska are of Alaska Native descent. Addressing disproportionality within the child welfare system in Alaska is a primary concern of the Office of Children's Services. The agency, in partnership with tribal groups and leaders, is working to address disproportionality. Tribal groups are active participants in Team Decision Making meetings. The Team Decision Making process provides for collective decision making with families of all cultural backgrounds and their support networks in working toward a placement solution for children that meets the needs of families and that is in the best interest of children.

To insure that its programs operate with a high standard of care, the Office of Children's Services has a continuous quality improvement process in place to monitor and improve service delivery. As part of this process, information is sought from stakeholders to learn about the quality of agency services. Information obtained through surveys assists management and staff in identifying areas for improvement and in developing and implementing program improvement activities. This report summarizes the findings obtained from a survey of parents who participated in the Team Decision Making process.

Section II: Methodology

The survey process began by identifying families who had participated in a Team Decision Making meeting. The survey period for identification of families was Sept. 7, 2006, through Nov. 30, 2006. There were 213 families who participated in Team Decision Making meetings during this period.

2.1 Collection of Information

The Evaluation Unit of the Office of Children's Services contacted parents who had participated in a Team Decision Making meeting. The survey interview process was conducted by telephone. Attempts to reach individuals from the compiled list of 213 families occurred over a five-day period. Up to four attempts were made to contact each identified participant. A total of 81 families were interviewed.

Parents who participated in the interview were assured that their identity would not be revealed. It was explained that the information they provided would be compiled with the information received from other participants. Respect and sensitivity to different cultures was incorporated into the interview. The responses from each participant were recorded on the survey instrument.

There were two limitations of the interview process. Only those parents with valid telephone numbers could be contacted. No messages were left on any attempt to contact a parent. Telephone calls to parents were made primarily between the hours of 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. The interviewers made some attempts to contact parents during the evening hours, but the majority of parents were contacted during regular office hours. This would indicate that most parents who participated in the survey were parents who stayed at home to care for their children or whose work schedule was not during the day.

Completed survey instruments were analyzed and a content analysis of the narrative comments was completed. Presentation of the comments assured that no individuals could be identified.

2.2 Survey Interview

The interview was structured in a manner that allowed for a discussion about parents' experiences with the Team Decision Making meeting. The telephone interview process allowed for a discussion where parents provided feedback and shared their experiences with the Team Decision Making process.

To guide the gathering of information, a survey instrument was developed with questions in three different content areas. The first area of inquiry pertained to questions about the organization of the Team Decision Making meeting. The second area of inquiry asked questions about the participant's level of comfort in the meeting, their involvement in the decisions

being made at the meeting, and the actions that occurred on their case as a result of the meeting. The third area of inquiry asked questions about participants' overall experience with their Team Decision Making meeting and process.

The final area provided for participants to share additional comments about their experience with the Team Decision Making process. This allowed for parents to respond to any concerns that were not addressed during the interview and to provide additional information.

2.3 Interview Participants

Of the 213 families who had participated in a Team Decision Making Meeting, the interviewers were able to reach 81 families and complete telephone interviews. This represents 38 percent of the families who had participated in a Team Decision Making Meeting during the three-month period of September – November 2006.

Addressing disproportionality is a priority of the Office of Children's Services. The Alaska Native population is approximately 16 percent of the state of Alaska's total population (United States Census Bureau, 2006 Census Estimate). Approximately 60 percent of the children in foster care in Alaska are of Alaska Native descent. Of the 213 families identified as having a Team Decision Making Meeting for the survey period, 99 families or 46 percent, were of Alaska Native descent. Table 1 shows the percent of the 81 families where one or more of the children were identified as of Alaska Native descent, Asian descent, Black/African American descent, or Caucasian descent.

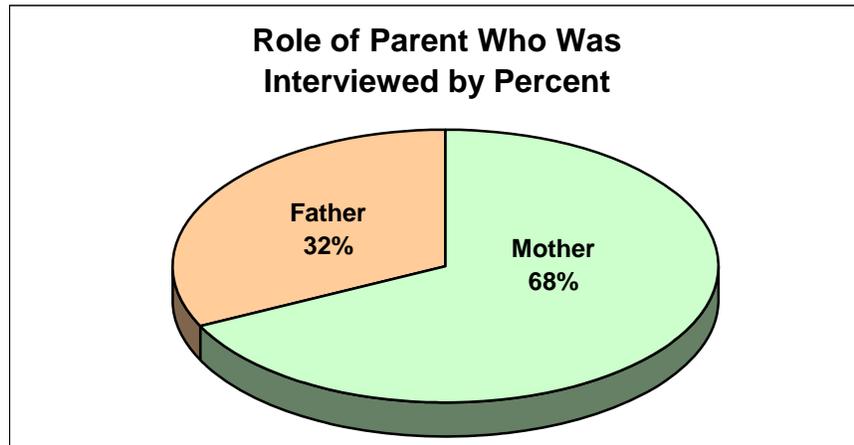
Table 1

Race of Children Whose Parents Participated in the Survey by Percent	
Race	Percent
American Indian/Alaska Native	48%
Asian	1%
Black/African American	15%
Caucasian	36%
Total	100%

Each parent in the family provides valuable information and both parents are encouraged to attend the Team Decision Making meeting whenever possible. In order to gain information regarding parents' attendance of the meeting, their role in the family was also provided.

Figure 1 presented below shows parents' role in their family who participated in a Team Decision Making meeting by mother and father.

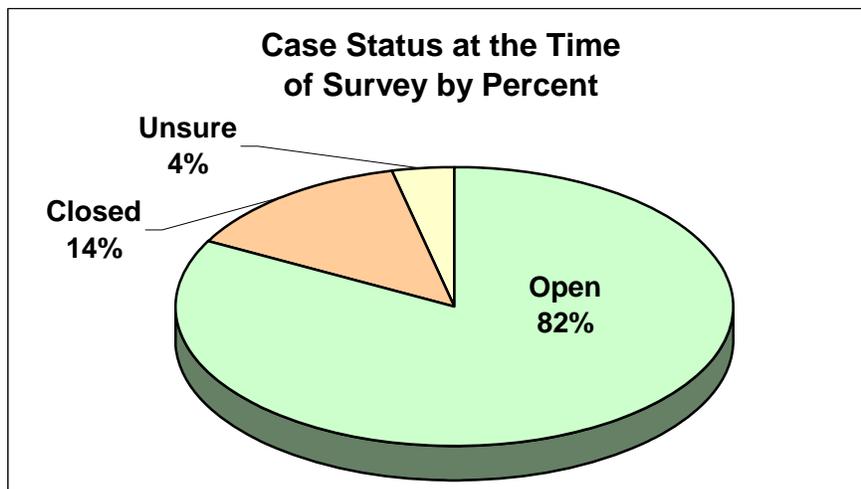
Figure 1



n = 81

Parents who were contacted were asked to indicate whether their case with the Office of Children's Services remained open which meant they were still receiving services from the Office of Children's Services, or if their case was closed which meant they had completed and were no longer receiving services. Understanding the status of a family's case assisted the interviewer in being sensitive to the family's needs during the interview. Figure 2 presents parents' responses to whether they knew if their case was currently open or closed with the Office of Children's Services at the time of the interview.

Figure 2



n = 81

Section III: Findings

3.1 Meeting Organization

A Team Decision Making meeting is held when there are safety concerns in a child's home that might require the child to be placed into out-of-home care. The meetings are also held for children in foster care who require a placement change due to a child's permanency goal changing or children being returned to their own home. Participants in a Team Decision Making meeting include the assigned caseworker, the parent's tribal representatives, relatives, family friends, support persons in the family network, and the Guardian ad Litem.

The Team Decision Making process identifies needs of the family and resources and community supports that the family has in order to aid them in providing care for their children. The facilitator who leads each meeting welcomes the family and others attending and encourages their participation. The goal of the meeting is to reach a consensus about the child's placement.

Participants in the telephone survey were asked to respond to questions about how the meeting in their case was organized. This included questions on notification of the parties to be included in the meeting, the reason for the meeting, if the purpose of the meeting was clearly explained, and the location of the meeting.

Notification of Meeting

Participants were asked who had informed them about the Team Decision Making meeting that was to occur on their case. Their responses are provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2

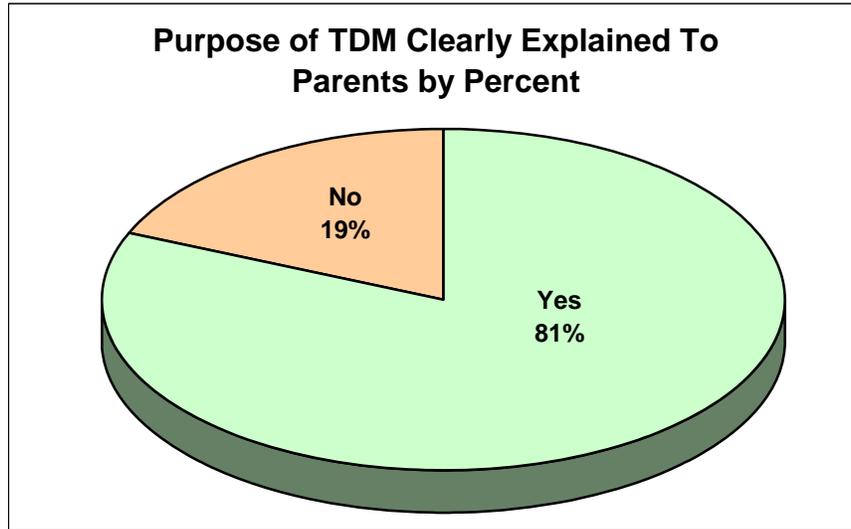
Person Who Informed Parent of Team Decision Making Meeting by Number and Percent		
Person	Number of Responses	Percent
Assigned Social Worker	66	81%
Other Staff	3	4%
Unsure	12	15%
Total	81	100%

Purpose of Meeting

Parents were asked if the purpose of the Team Decision Making meeting was clearly explained to them. Additional comments from participants were received for this question. One participant indicated that they were told that the meeting was to discuss placement options regarding a

child's treatment needs and another participant indicated that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss a change in placement. Parents' responses are presented in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3

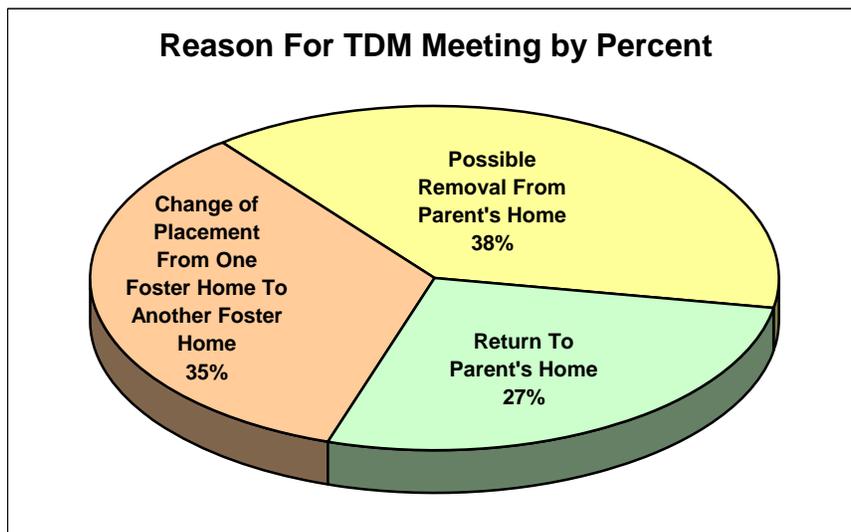


n = 81

Reason for Meeting

Parents were then asked to indicate the reason for having the Team Decision Making meeting. Participant's responses are provided below in Figure 4.

Figure 4



n = 81

Support to Parents

Parents have a variety of support networks in their life which include friends, relatives, coworkers, and pastors. These support persons can be helpful to parents during the process of working with the Office of Children’s Services. Parents were asked whether they were encouraged to bring friends, relatives, or other support persons to the Team Decision Making meeting. Table 3 presents their responses.

Table 3

Parents Were Asked To Bring Support Persons to the Team Decision Making Meeting by Number and Percent		
	Number of Responses	Percent
Yes	48	59%
No	27	33%
Unsure	6	8%
Total	81	100%

Location of Meeting

Team Decision Making meetings can be held in different settings. The setting of the meeting often depends on the status of the children at the time of the meeting and the location and needs of the parents involved. Participants were asked where the Team Decision Making meeting they attended was held. Table 4 presents their responses.

Table 4

Location of Team Decision Making Meeting by Number and Percent		
Location	Number of Responses	Percent
Office of Children’s Services	65	80%
Hospital	6	7%
Another Agency	5	6%
Other	3	4%
Unsure	2	3%
Total	81	100%

Telephone Participation

If a parent is unavailable to attend the Team Decision Making meeting in person, they are encouraged to participate in the meeting by telephone. Of the 81 parents who were surveyed, 74 indicated that they attended the meeting in person and the remaining 7 parents indicated that they participated by telephone.

Transportation to Meeting

Parents who attended the meeting in person were asked if they had adequate transportation to attend. There were 67 participants who indicated that they had transportation to the meeting and 7 participants who indicated that they did not have adequate transportation to attend the meeting. Two parents indicated that they had a bus pass issued by the Office of Children’s Services so that they could attend the meeting. One parent commented that they received a taxi voucher from their caseworker due to a disability in order to attend the meeting in person.

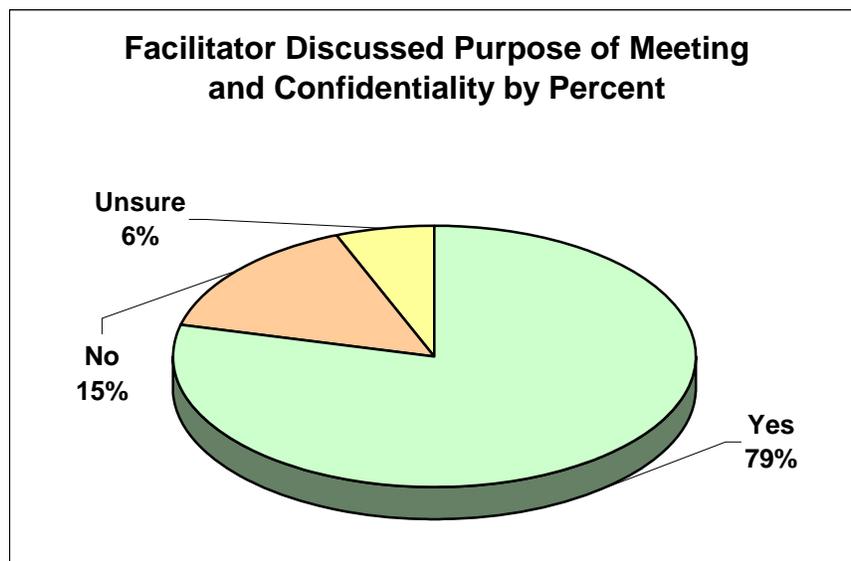
3.2 Meeting Atmosphere

The Office of Children’s Services strives to insure that the Team Decision Making process is both structured and comfortable to all individuals who are in attendance. There is a facilitator who leads each meeting.

Confidentiality, Participation, and Decision Making

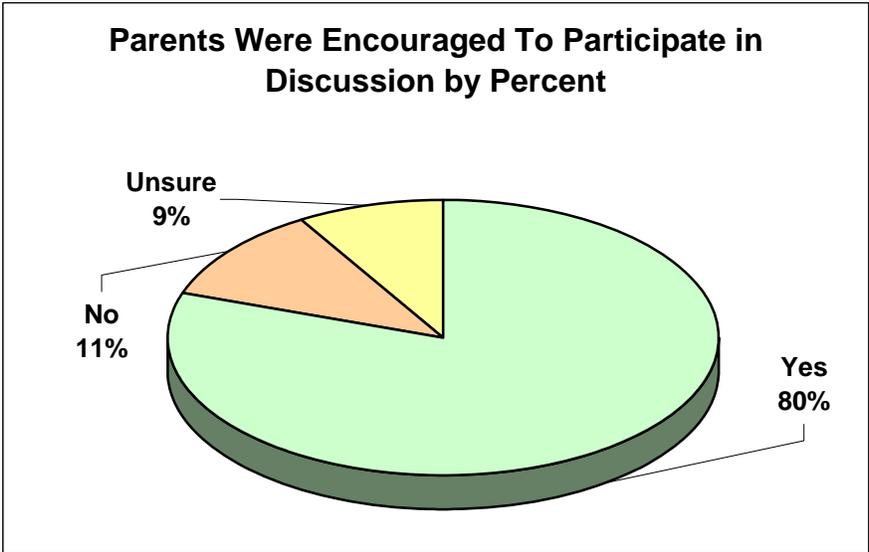
The facilitator begins each meeting by discussing the guidelines for the meeting. The guidelines include such issues as confidentiality of the discussion, the importance of everyone having an opportunity to speak, and clarifying that if the group is not able to reach a consensus or agreement during the meeting on placement, then the Office of Children’s Services will initiate case actions. Figures 5 through 7 present the findings in these areas.

Figure 5



n = 81

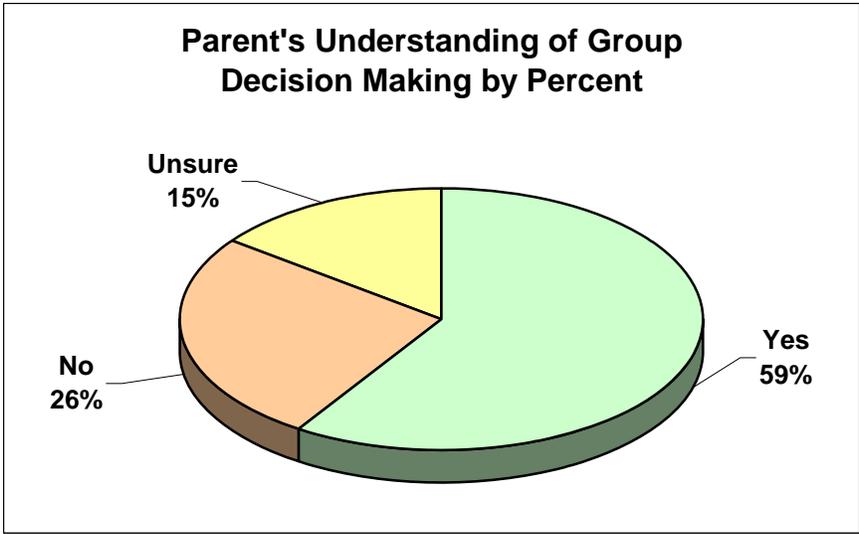
Figure 6



n = 81

During the Team Decision Making meetings, efforts are made to reach a placement decision for children. When group discussion does not lead to a consensus regarding the child’s placement, the caseworker becomes responsible for placement. Parents were asked if they were made aware of this process when the group is unable to reach a decision. Their responses are presented in Figure 7 below.

Figure 7

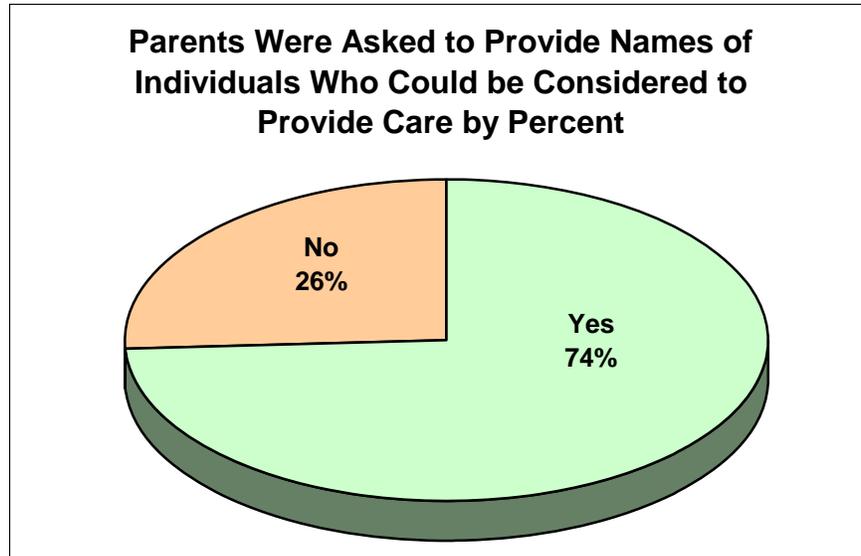


n = 81

Parent Suggestions for Placement

When children must be placed in out-of-home care, parents are the best resource for identifying relatives and friends who could be considered as caregivers. Participants were asked if they were encouraged to provide names of relatives and friends who could be considered to provide care for their children. Figure 8 presents the findings.

Figure 8



n = 81

Group Decision Making

Participants were asked to indicate whether the Team Decision Making group as a whole made the final decision or if there were differing opinions that resulted in the caseworker alone making the final placement decision for their children. Parents' responses are provided in Table 5 below.

Table 5

Person Who Made Final Placement Decision by Number and Percent		
	Number of Responses	Percent
Group	45	56%
Caseworker	25	31%
Unsure	11	13%
Total	81	100%

Child Placement Decision and Agreement

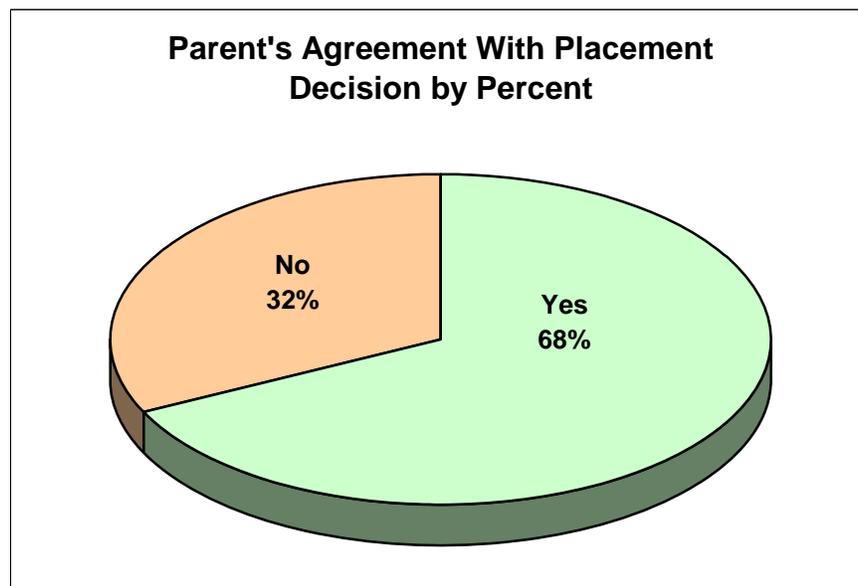
Participants in the telephone survey were asked to indicate the final placement decision which was reached in their Team Decision Making meeting. Responses are outlined in Table 6.

Table 6

Final Placement Decision by Number and Percent		
Placement	Number of Responses	Percent
Maintain the child in own home	11	14%
Place child with relative	17	21%
Place child with other parent	4	5%
Place child in a foster home	13	16%
Maintain child in the same out-of-home placement	8	10%
Return child to participant	19	23%
Other (included placements for treatment facilities)	9	11%
Total	81	100%

Participants were asked to indicate whether they agreed with the placement decision made at the Team Decision Making meeting. Figure 9 presents parents' responses.

Figure 9

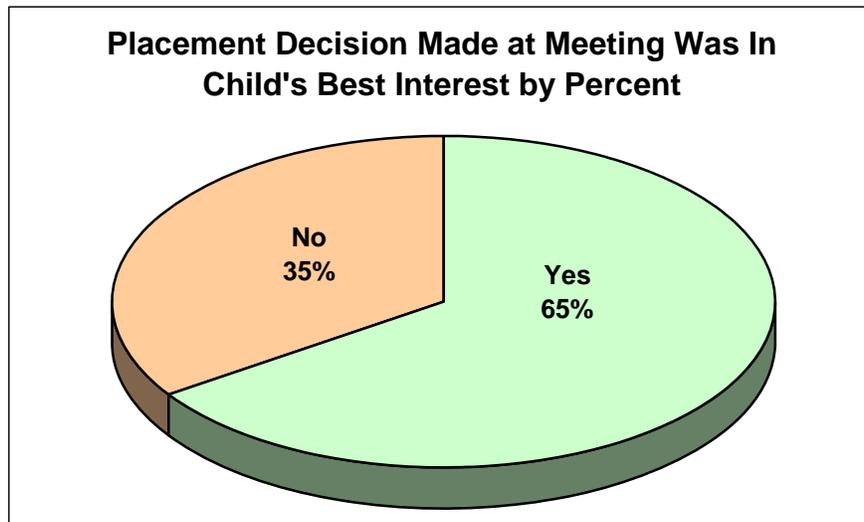


n = 81

Child's Best Interest

The Office of Children's Services strives to consider children's best interest throughout the case while maintaining their safety at all times. Parents were asked to respond to whether they felt that the final placement decision made at the Team Decision Making meeting was in their child's best interest. Their responses are presented in Figure 10 below.

Figure 10



n = 81

Placement Decision Occurrence

The survey asked participants to indicate whether the final placement decision made in the Team Decision Making meeting occurred. Table 7 presents parent's responses by number and percent.

Table 7

Parents Agreement That Placement Action Occurred After the Team Decision Meeting by Number and Percent		
	Number of Responses	Percent
Yes – placement action occurred	71	88%
No – placement action did not occur	6	7%
Unsure	4	5%
Total	81	100%

Placement Decision Timeframe

Participants in the Team Decision Making meeting whose children had a placement decision made were asked to respond to how long it took for the placement or move to occur following the meeting. Parents' responses by number and percent are provided in Table 8 below.

Table 8

Length of Time Before Placement Decision Occurred by Number and Percent		
Time Period	Number of Responses	Percent
No Move - Child Maintained in Own Home	6	7%
Within 24 Hours	42	53%
Two to Six Days	13	16%
Seven to Ten Days	6	7%
Did Not Know or Unsure	14	17%
Total	81	100%

3.3 Participant Experience

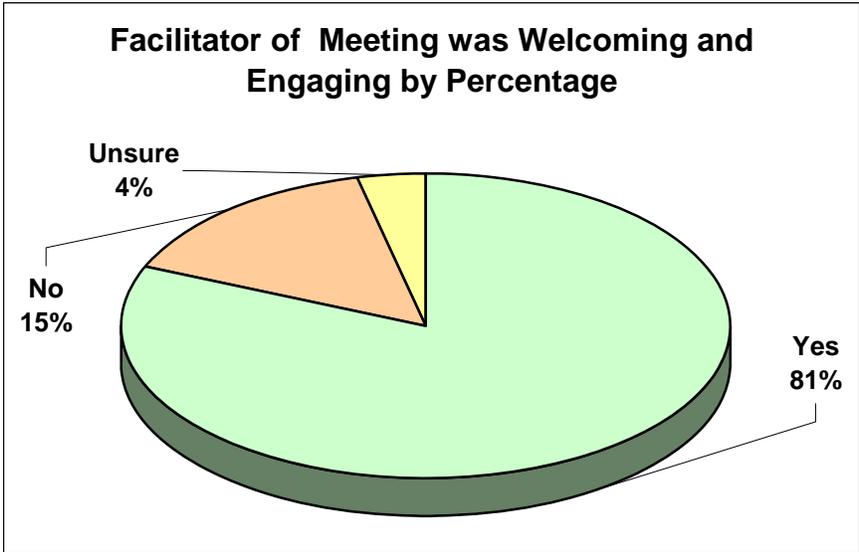
The Team Decision Making process enhances parents ability to be part of the decision making team and provides parents a means to share their culture, tradition, and belief systems.

The placement decisions that are made during the Team Decision Making meeting incorporate several factors for consideration including: how the placement is able to preserve the parent-child relationship; whether parents' beliefs and values are preserved; consideration of the family's culture; and if the placement is able to meet the child's needs. During the Team Decision Making meeting, as the discussion and planning for placement occurs, the culture and beliefs of the parents need to be taken into consideration.

Experience with Facilitator

Parents were asked to indicate whether the facilitator of the Team Decision Making meeting they attended was welcoming and engaging throughout the meeting. Parents' responses are indicated in Figure 11.

Figure 11

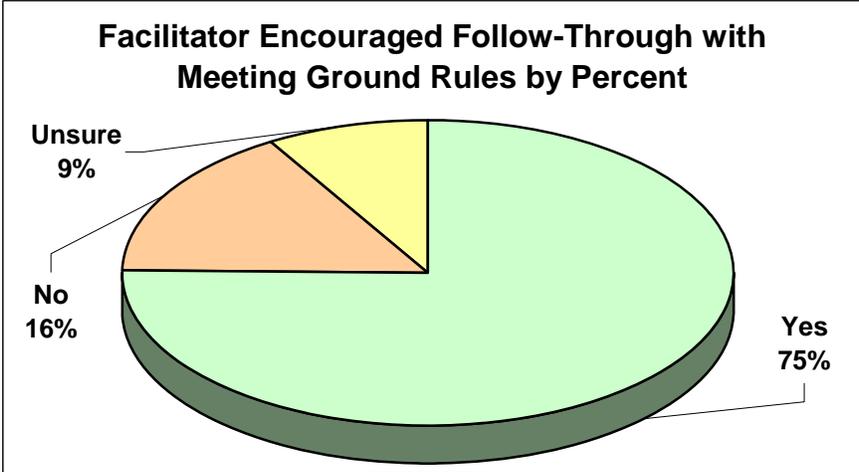


n = 81

Ground Rules

There are ground rules for the Team Decision Making meeting to insure that all voices and opinions are heard. Some of the rules of the meeting include the maintaining of confidentiality, respecting others' opinions, and allowing everyone the opportunity to speak without interruption. Participants were asked whether they felt that the facilitator encouraged all participants to follow through with the ground rules. The findings are presented in Figure 12 presents the findings.

Figure 12

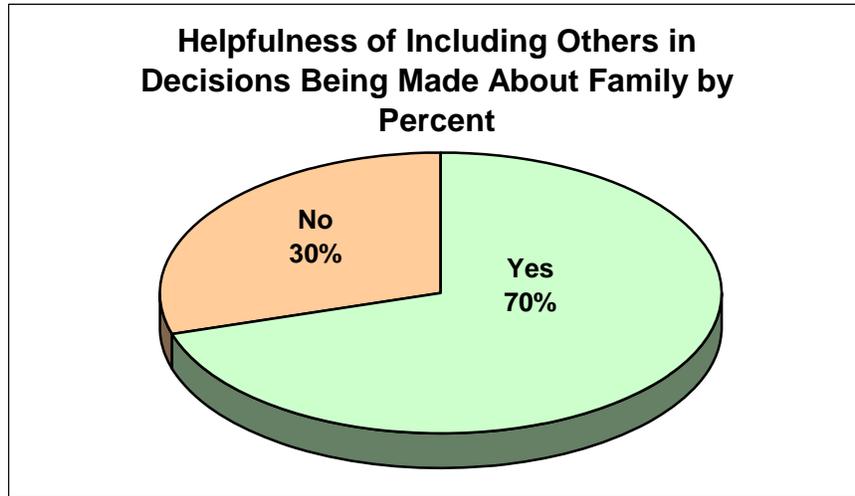


n = 81

Additional Participants Involved In Decision

Participants were asked if they believed that having other parties involved in the decisions being made about their family was helpful. The response of the participants is shown below in Figure 13.

Figure 13

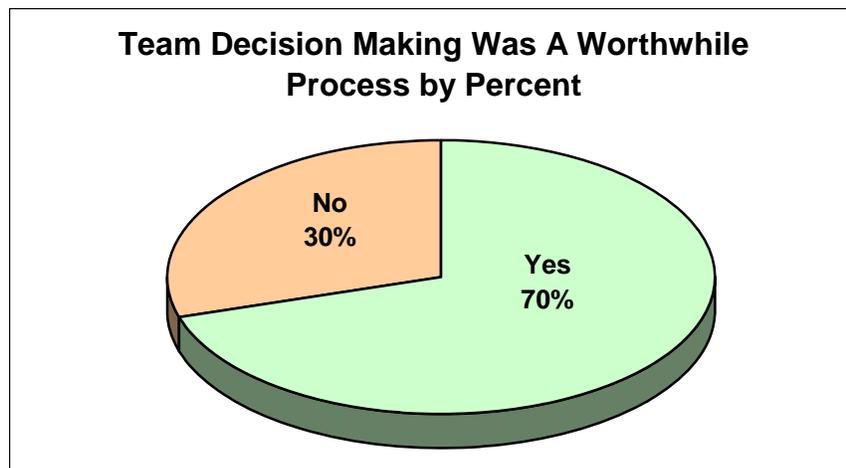


n = 81

Belief About Team Decision Making Process

Participants were asked to indicate their belief if the Team Decision Making meeting they attended was a worthwhile process. The response from parents is presented in Figure 14 below.

Figure 14



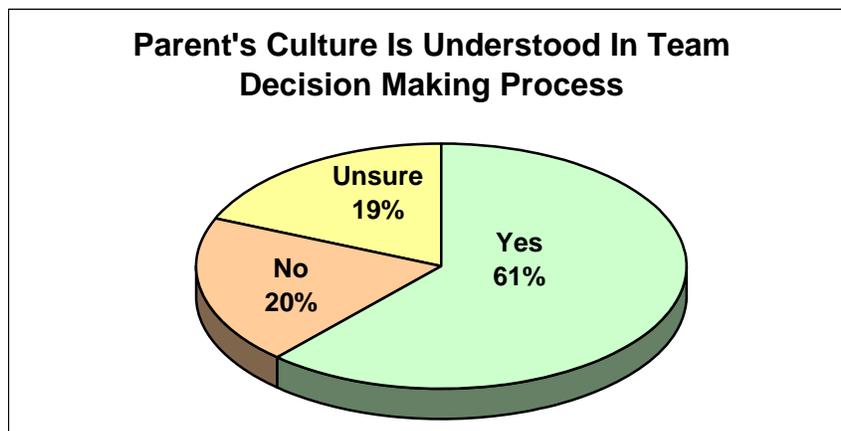
n = 81

Parents' Culture

The Office of Children's Services works diligently to insure that parents are treated with respect during all phases of their case and that their culture is considered when decisions are made. The Team Decision Making process plays an important role in insuring that the needs and input from parents are heard and taken into consideration. Sixty-nine percent of parents surveyed indicated that they were treated with fairness and respect during the Team Decision Making meeting.

Parents were asked if their culture was understood during the Team Decision Making Meeting. Figure 15 presents parents' responses.

Figure 15



n = 81

Consideration of Culture in Placement Decision

Parents were asked to respond to whether they felt that the decision regarding placement that was made during the Team Decision Making meeting took their culture and beliefs into consideration. Table 9 presents the parents' responses.

Table 9

Parents Who Indicate Placement Decision Took Their Culture and Beliefs Into Consideration By Number and Percent		
	Number of Responses	Percent
Yes	48	59%
No	16	20%
Unsure	17	21%
Total	81	100%

Section IV: Additional Comments

Parents were given an opportunity to provide other information about their experience with the Team Decision Making process. The comments were analyzed and are summarized into areas of strengths of the Team Decision Making process, and comments made about areas for consideration for change. The comments are presented so that no parents, children, or caseworkers are individually identified. Comments were received from 59 parents, representing 73 percent of those who were interviewed.

4.1 Areas of Strength

Several comments were received indicating parents' satisfaction with the Team Decision Making process. One parent indicated that it was very helpful to have multiple people involved in the placement decisions being made. Another participant commented that the Team Decision Making meeting was helpful as their child was able to obtain needed treatment. That participant also stated that the Office of Children's Services has been "a blessing." One parent commented that the meeting was important as they were able to meet with everyone at one time in one location. The parent stated that the process is helpful because it allows each person involved in the Team Decision Making meeting to hear the ideas and suggestions that others may have about the placement decisions being discussed.

Several parents made comments about their culture and being respected. One parent stated that the Team Decision Making facilitator was respectful and listened to the concerns brought forth by everyone during the meeting. The parent also stated that their culture was taken into consideration when the final decision was made as the child was placed into a culturally sensitive home. Another parent indicated appreciation that the tribal representative had a voice in the meeting and was able to provide valuable input which influenced the placement decision.

One parent reported that they had attended multiple Team Decision Making meetings and that every meeting focused on reaching a decision that was in their child's best interest. Some participants commented that the Office of Children's Services helped them know what they needed to do in order to have their children remain in their home. One participant stated that they are happy to have their child home and that they do not know what they would have done without the intervention by the Office of Children's Services and the Team Decision Making meeting which resulted in the child returning home.

Some of the comments received from parents were about the organization and productivity of the Team Decision Making meeting. Comments include one parent who felt that the meeting was organized and that it was beneficial to have a group of people providing input about their child. Another parent stated that the meeting was productive and that it is a good tool for helping families in their time of need. Another parent commented that the facilitator of the Team Decision Making meeting kept everyone on track during the meeting and that they did a good job of making sure everyone had a chance to share their thoughts during the meeting.

4.2 Areas for Consideration for Change

There were comments received from some parents who felt they were not given sufficient time to prepare for the Team Decision Making meeting. One parent commented that they were informed of the meeting on the same day the meeting was to take place. Another parent reported that they would like to have had a meeting with their caseworker and the facilitator prior to attending the Team Decision Making meeting.

Several parents expressed frustration with the Office of Children's Services. They stated that input from other parties was not taken into consideration and that a decision had been made about placement prior to the Team Decision Making meetings taking place. Other parents commented that their child had already moved to a new placement prior to the meeting being held. There were also comments from parents expressing concern that after a decision had been reached during a Team Decision Making meeting, the agency did not follow through with the decision or would change the decision without having another meeting to discuss the reasons for the change.

There were four parents who expressed concern that the placement decision made at the meeting resulted in the reduction of visitation due to location of the placement in another region of the state or placement of the child out-of-state. One parent stated that their child is placed with relatives in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley and the placement does not allow for regular visitation to occur. Another parent stated that their child was placed out-of-state without the benefit of a Team Decision Making meeting being held prior to the child's placement. That parent commented that if a Team Decision Making meeting had taken place, their child might not have been placed with a relative outside Alaska.

Several parents indicated that transportation was a barrier in attending the meeting and also in accessing needed services. One parent indicated that they were unable to attend the Team Decision Making meeting in person because they did not have adequate transportation. Other comments received cited transportation to complete required services as being difficult to arrange for and receive. One parent stated that it is difficult for them to arrange for transportation due to a disability. That parent stated if they are going to be required to do services, the Office of Children's Services should try to assist them in meeting their transportation needs.

Section V: Summary

The Office of Children's Services strives to insure that the safety and well-being needs of children are met. This effort is strengthened through the implementation of the Team Decision Making process in the Anchorage Field Office. Parents and children benefit from the collaborative approach to decision making on cases. The Office of Children's Services benefits from having more input from parents, tribal groups, extended family, friends, and other parties about placement decisions for children.

The Office of Children's Services works diligently to provide the highest quality of service to children and parents. Families benefit from the Team Decision Making process when there are issues in their home that may result in children needing to be removed from their home. Relatives including grandparents and other extended family are sought to provide care to children who cannot remain in their own home. When relatives are not available, the agency provides care to children through licensed foster homes. Some children also have treatment needs that require placement out of their own homes.

Working together with tribal groups is an important element in providing Alaska Native families with services to meet their identified needs. The Office of Children's Services works closely with tribal groups to insure that Native children who come to the attention of the agency have their cultural needs met. Over half of the participants in the telephone interview reported that their culture was respected throughout the Team Decision Making process and that their culture and beliefs were taken into consideration as placement decisions were made during the meeting.

Working with parents to insure the safety of children requires an in-depth understanding of the needs of the family. Efforts to understand the needs of families are strengthened through the collaborative approach of the Team Decision Making process. Participants in the Team Decision Making interview reported that the process was worthwhile. They also indicate that it was helpful to have other individuals involved in the placement decisions being made. It is paramount that parents are treated with respect throughout their involvement with the Office of Children's Services.

The provision of services to families and children is challenging and requires the efforts of parents to insure the safety of their children. Gathering information from parents who have participated in a Team Decision Making meeting is vital to the continued improvement of service delivery by the Office of Children's Services. The response and thoughtful comments to this survey by parents who participated in the Team Decision Making process are deeply appreciated and will be incorporated by staff and management in efforts to continue to improve services to assist families and children.