

Research Brief



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Voices from the Field:

STAKEHOLDER
PERSPECTIVES ON
FAMILY FINDING

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OVERVIEW

The Family Finding model provides child welfare practitioners with intensive search and engagement techniques to identify family members and other adults close to a child in foster care, and to involve these adults in developing and carrying out a plan for the emotional and legal permanency of the child.¹

This brief describes the importance of establishing such permanent connections for children and youth, along with the challenges in forming and building lasting connections, from the perspectives of judges, guardians ad litem, and family finding specialists who regularly interact with children and youth in foster care. It also incorporates the ideas and input of national Family Finding experts.

KEY FINDINGS

We heard many of the same successes, concerns, and strategies for policy and program improvement from each of the distinct stakeholder groups:

- Family is important. All groups noted the importance of permanent family connections for children and youth in foster care, either as a placement resource or as an emotional support/connection.
- Family involvement is not always easy. Although permanent family connections are important, engaging and involving family can present a variety of challenges for the birth parents, relatives, agency, and courts.
- Family dynamics matter. Family dynamics and relationships are important to the success and maintenance of a permanent family connection, but can create a variety of challenges at various stages of the permanency process.
- Relatives need more support. Family members who are willing to become permanent placements for children and youth often need financial assistance and additional supports to care for these children.
- Program structure can support permanency. Stakeholders agreed on several programmatic strategies—such as early and effective family engagement, and specialized Family Finding staff—that might positively impact the development of permanent family connections.

¹ Emotional permanency is achieved when a child has a permanent emotional connection to another individual. Legal permanency is achieved when a child has a permanent legal connection to another individual (e.g. through adoption or legal guardianship).

About Family Finding

The Family Finding model provides child welfare professionals with techniques for identifying and finding family members and other adults who care about a child placed in foster care. (Other adults may include friends, neighbors, mentors, school teachers, coaches, teammates, religious leaders, youth group leaders, and community supports.) In addition, Family Finding provides strategies for involving these adults in developing and carrying out a plan for helping children achieve emotional and legal permanency. The program was conceived in 1999 by Kevin Campbell and colleagues at Catholic Community Services in Tacoma, Washington. Campbell was inspired by the family-tracing techniques used by international aid agencies to find and reunite family members who had been separated by war, civil disturbance, or natural disaster. Using genealogical archives and internet-based services, Campbell and colleagues were able to increase the number of life-long connections for children in foster care in the agency's service area and decrease the number of children in non-relative care, and to inspire the passage of state legislation in 2003 requiring intensive relative searches for all children in out-of-home care. With the passage in 2008 of the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, all states are now required to notify relatives of the placement of a related child in foster care.

The Family Finding model is comprised of six stages, including: 1) discovering at least 40 family members and important people in the child's life through an extensive review of a child's case file, through interviewing the youth (if appropriate) in addition to family members and other supportive people, and through the use of internet search tools; 2) engaging as many family members and supportive adults as possible through in-person interviews, phone conversations, and written letters and emails, with the goal of identifying the child's extended family, and identifying a group of family members and supportive adults, as appropriate, willing to participate in a planning meeting on how to keep the child safely connected to family members; 3) planning for the successful future of the child with the participation of family members and others important to the child by convening family meetings; 4) making decisions during the family meetings that support the legal and emotional permanency of the child; 5) evaluating the permanency plans developed for the child; and 6) providing follow-up supports to ensure that the child and his/her family can access and receive informal and formal supports essential to maintaining permanency for the child (Campbell, 2005; 2010).

DATA SOURCE

This brief summarizes data gathered from interviews and/or surveys of judges, guardians ad litem, Family Finding specialists, and national Family Finding experts.² It is the fifth brief in a series summarizing findings from Child Trends' evaluations of the family finding model. Links to the first four briefs can be found in the Resources section.

We conducted a series of interviews with Family Finding experts from across the country, including program developers and managers, policy experts and advocates, and researchers, covering a variety of topics including the target populations served, program parameters, program context, and research issues. We also conducted interviews with dependency judges and guardians ad litem (GALs) from a state where Child Trends is currently conducting an evaluation of Family Finding, to understand how these court officers perceive the importance of permanent family connections and the challenges in engaging families.

During site visits conducted during this evaluation, researchers determined that there were many factors that made cases successful or unsuccessful. Based on this field work, Child Trends developed an online survey for Family Finding specialists, to pinpoint barriers and facilitators to securing permanent placements for children through Family Finding.

CONSISTENT THEMES ACROSS PARTICIPANT TYPE

Although each group interviewed or surveyed has a unique perspective on Family Finding and works with children and families in different capacities, several common themes arose.

² In total, interviews were conducted with eight experts, ten judges, and eight guardians ad litem between June 2013 – September 2013. A total of 21 Family Finding specialists completed an online survey between July 30th and October 1st, 2013.

Theme 1: Family is important

Experts, judges, GALs, and Family Finding specialists all agree on the importance of the family's role in achieving both emotional and legal permanency for children. Our interviews found that all program experts—program developers and managers, policy advocates, and researchers—were in agreement that both emotional and legal permanency outcomes are paramount. It is the specific case nuances, such as child and family characteristics or circumstances, that dictate which one should take precedence. For example, for an infant, legal permanency often takes precedence, as it will naturally grow into emotional permanency. But for an older youth who is about to age out of the foster care system, emotional permanency is often seen as more important, as they need people to support them as they transition into adulthood.

The importance of family in reaching legal permanency was highlighted by Family Finding specialists. When asked about the factors that contribute to the success of moving a case toward legal permanency, the most frequently cited factor was family members' being agreeable to serving as a placement for the child. All but one of the specialists cited a family-related factor as contributing to the case's success.

Judges and GALs used words such as “critical,” “extremely important,” and “essential” to describe the importance of family connections and the role of such connections in providing or supporting emotional permanency. They discussed the role family can play in helping a child develop his or her self-identity and self-esteem; the support family can provide after a child turns 18 and “ages out” of foster care; the support family can provide to birth parents working toward reunification; and improved outcomes experienced by children who have such permanent connections.

Theme 2: Family involvement is not always easy

Although permanent connections are very important, stakeholders noted many challenges to fully engaging relatives in creating and maintaining supportive relationships and placements. The following challenges were mentioned by stakeholders:

FAMILY MEMBERS ARE DIFFICULT TO LOCATE OR LIVE FAR AWAY. Judges and GALs noted that due to economic constraints, many extended family members are highly mobile, lacking consistent housing and phone numbers. This makes it more difficult and time consuming for the case worker or Family Finding specialist to find contact information. Some birth parents are unwilling to share relatives' contact information with case workers because they are reluctant to cooperate with the agency in general or because they are ashamed of the allegation of abuse or neglect and do not want relatives to know about the removal. Additionally, when a child is placed out-of-county or far from a relative's home, it becomes more difficult to arrange visits or calls between children and extended family.

FAMILY MEMBERS AND BIRTH PARENTS ARE OFTEN RESISTANT TO AGENCY/COURT INVOLVEMENT. Stakeholders noted difficulties in the relationship between relatives and the agency and/or the courts, which can contribute to a loss of connection or resistance to having a child placed with relatives. Judges and GALs reported that relatives can be hesitant to cooperate with agency case workers. Relatives may be concerned that they will upset the birth parents by seeming to align with the agency.

As described above, some birth parents are hesitant to share relatives' contact information with the agency. Similarly, concern was expressed over the adversarial nature of the court proceedings, specifically that birth parents are hesitant to discuss anything with case workers for fear it will be an admission of abuse or neglect. Such a fear may prevent birth parents from sharing information on possible placement options or relative connections. One judge explained that some relatives who are placement resources for children are

resistant to obeying court orders, particularly orders regulating visitation, as they do not always have healthy relationships with the birth parent. When relatives do not comply with court orders, the placement can be terminated by the court.

FAMILY MEMBERS ARE NOT ALWAYS AWARE OF ADDITIONAL OPTIONS. Several judges, GALs, and Family Finding specialists noted that families are not always aware that they can be a part of the child's life without becoming a placement resource. The specialists felt that presenting family members with options as to how they can support the child helps keep them engaged in case planning and the child's life. Judges and GALs suggested that additional information and supports for families could help enhance their relationship with the child, thus benefitting the child with a life-long connection, even if the child remains in foster care.

CHILDREN DO NOT ALWAYS REALIZE THE VALUE OF BUILDING A FAMILY CONNECTION. Family Finding specialists reported that the relatives are not the only party that must recognize the importance of family: the children must, too. Specialists reported that children who they perceived as embracing Family Finding efforts and open to being placed with family were more likely to reach permanency. In cases that were not successful in reaching permanency, children did not want to be placed with family due to allegiance to birth parents or a lack of trust in other family members.

Theme 3: Family dynamics matter

A positive permanent connection between relatives and children in out-of-home placements often requires interaction and cooperation between relatives, birth parents, and children. Numerous challenges can arise while navigating these relationships, which can jeopardize emotional and/or legal permanency for children and youth.

RELATIVES AND BIRTH PARENTS. Judges and GALs reported that relatives may be resistant to being a placement because they are frustrated with the birth parents and feel that they will be permanently tied to the birth parents if they become involved. Family Finding specialists also cited examples where family members “burnt bridges” with the child's parents or “did not want to interfere with raising the children of their loved ones.” On the other hand, some judges noted that relatives are occasionally not willing to become placements out of loyalty to birth parents who may be actively working toward reunification. Family Finding specialists gave examples where extended members would not offer permanency because they were hopeful the youth would be returned to the birth parents, and did not want to hinder reunification efforts.

RELATIVES AND THE CHILD. Family Finding specialists said that many children lack trust in their extended family members and therefore do not want to be placed with them. Sometimes the children feel abandoned by their extended family, especially if they have no previous relationship with the family and have been lingering in foster care for long periods of time. The lack of trust can also stem from the influence of their birth parents, who do not always trust their own families. Birth parents sometimes encourage older children to be uncooperative with case workers and refuse contact with relatives. Just as with relatives and birth parents, judges and GALs reported that children sometimes fear a potential loss of connection to their parents if they agree to live with relatives.

Theme 4: More supports are needed for relatives

Stakeholders reported that many relatives need additional support—financial, therapeutic, and administrative—to be a placement for the child. Program developers and managers report that across the country, service provider agencies are beginning to more-

comprehensively examine how these types of supports to relative caregivers can help enhance and maintain permanency plans reached through Family Finding efforts. Program experts pointed out that as more relatives express interest in becoming placement options, the importance of these kinship supports becomes more apparent. While already available in some areas, advocates cited the need for more widespread kinship navigation services to help families understand and work through the child welfare system.

Relatives may face challenges that make permanent placement difficult. Judges and GALs reported that relatives often face personal issues, such as age, family obligations, and lack of time. Family Finding specialists gave examples of family members who were reported to have “too much on their plate with other children in their home,” or felt “too old” to begin parenting again. Specialists strongly felt that more willingness from family members to be placements would help their cases reach permanency in the form of relative placements.

FINANCIAL SUPPORTS. While the availability of stipends to relative placements varies from state to state, the judges and GALs interviewed pointed out that in their state, unlike foster parents who receive a regular monthly stipend, non-licensed relative placements are only eligible for financial support through TANF and SNAP benefits³ available for the child. For families that may already be struggling financially, judges and GALs noted these funds are not sufficient to cover the costs of caring for a child. Family Finding specialists felt that many relatives are also in need of child care or other material supports, and many family members looked to secure these resources through their own personal resources, community resources, or other family members.

THERAPEUTIC SUPPORTS. All stakeholders noted that many children in foster care have emotional, mental health, or behavioral issues that may make it difficult for relatives to care for them. Specialists identified child behaviors that inhibit permanency such as aggression, running away, as well as sexualized and delinquent behavior. Stakeholders suggested that agencies need to make sure that relatives who express an interest in being a permanent placement for a child are offered and provided with the necessary therapeutic supports and services to make the placement possible, and to keep the placement intact. One interviewee described how difficult it would be for a single relative, working full time, to successfully advocate for and fund the mental health resources that a child may need.

Some judges and GALs also expressed concern that such supports are unavailable in some states or regions. With a dearth of mental health supports available and a large number of children with significant needs, children may need services or placements that are located far from a relative’s home, making placement logistically difficult or impossible.

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORTS. Family Finding specialists noted that adequate administrative and general support for families from the child welfare agency is important. One specialist described a family that did not feel “assured from [agency] personnel that they would receive future support and assistance,” and therefore did not agree to become a placement for the child. Specialists also cited the need for further education and training from the agency on how to deal with the troubling child behaviors mentioned above.

Theme 5: Program structure can support permanency

Stakeholders discussed several specific ideas and strategies to consider in the implementation of Family Finding that may help support potential relative connections and better meet the needs of unconnected children and youth.

³ SNAP, or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, was previously known as the food stamps program. It provides financial assistance to families below a certain income level for food purchases. Child-only TANF, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, is a financial assistance program available to relative caregivers who fit federal and state criteria.

TIMING OF FAMILY FINDING SERVICES. Several judges and GALs raised concerns that Family Finding begins too late in the child welfare case, after all other options have been exhausted.⁴ They felt that keeping the children waiting, without a family connection, caused feelings of isolation that could have been addressed earlier. They also noted that it can be frustrating for families to find out about the child after the child has been in care for quite some time—particularly as home studies and ICPC⁵ compliance can take significant time to complete, delaying the placement. Finally, judges and GALs were concerned that a relative found late in the process could disrupt a stable placement with a foster parent or adoptive placement.

Experts across the board agree that agencies tend to be moving toward provision of Family Finding services at the front end of the child welfare system, when children are first coming into out-of-home care. Programmatic experts and judges/GALs pointed out that these children have different needs than children who have been lingering in care. Front-end services are often more focused on family members' being a support to both the birth parents and the child. Raising children is difficult in the best of circumstances, and birth parents working toward reunification who are struggling with economic or mental health challenges may benefit from the additional support and encouragement that extended family can provide. However, as mentioned earlier, some birth parents can be resistant to family involvement due to embarrassment about their involvement in the child welfare system or because of family dynamics, posing challenges in providing front-end services.

DESIGNATED FAMILY FINDING SPECIALIST. Several judges and GALs reported that having a designated staff member apart from the child's case worker is a significant benefit, as the assigned case worker may be not be able to invest time in both reunification services and locating and supporting relatives. Family Finding specialists also tend to have access to a wide range of databases and search techniques that are not always available to case workers. In some cases, these specialists are a part of a private agency, contracted to provide Family Finding services to public agency cases. Judges and GALs also reported that family members may better respond to contact from a worker not affiliated with the public agency due to the stigma associated with some public agencies.

Researchers reported that agencies implementing a specialized (designated) Family Finding specialist model are finding that the specialist needs to remain involved in the case for a longer period of time than the Family Finding model originally intended. Experts reported that when Family Finding specialists wrap up their efforts before plans are in place or executed, the urgency of the family's commitments can get lost in the hand off back to the child's case worker. Sometimes the plans are for informal contacts, such as visits or letters, and when case workers are already feeling overwhelmed, these plans can be pushed aside. When not using a designated specialist, advocates and policymakers report that having additional, specialized staff assisting with the discovery of family members (the first stage of Family Finding) has been very helpful, allowing case workers more time to focus on other, more pressing aspects of the case.

PRACTICE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Our research brought out several practice and policy implications that may be useful to those considering initiating, strengthening or expanding a Family Finding program.

BUILD A "FAMILY-FRIENDLY" CULTURE. One key finding across stakeholders is that relatives need to feel comfortable with and supported by the child welfare agency and courts. According

⁴ Interviewees did note that the issues of timing could be caused by specific criteria of the local program or pilot in a particular court district or county.

⁵ The Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC) is an agreement between states establishing procedures for the placement of children across state lines. Depending on the agreements and requirements of individual states, completing the requisite procedures can be a time-consuming process for relatives who do not live in North Carolina but wish to have a North Carolina child placed in their home.

to experts, implementation of Family Finding marks a culture shift in many child welfare systems by emphasizing the importance of involving relatives in supporting and case planning for children at all levels. Stakeholders agree the program cannot be successful without the buy-in of all, from agency administrators to court personnel to front-line staff. Family involvement—as a placement resource or emotional support—should be encouraged by everyone involved with a case. Examples of family-friendly policies and practices include prioritizing placement with siblings, and encouraging and supporting relative placements.

There are several ways to build a more family-friendly culture that may support relative connections and placements for children in foster care. Agency staff, Family Finding specialists, GALs, judges, and attorneys may benefit from trainings on effective family engagement, including understanding a family’s needs and how to address them. Such training could also help stakeholders understand how to better communicate with relatives about available services and supports. Training on the specifics of Family Finding services, including referral processes, may help ensure all stakeholders understand exactly how to initiate and monitor a case. Another strategy to increase agency buy-in, according to program experts, is highlighting and sharing successes achieved through Family Finding and integrating the model into existing agency structure. Judges and GALs also describe the delicate balance between supporting families and relatives within an adversarial system.

INCREASE SUPPORTS AND SERVICES TO RELATIVES. Agency policies need to be examined to determine how to better support relatives in becoming a placement for children in foster care. Relatives can qualify for additional services and financial support by going through the process to become a licensed foster care placement, but many find it difficult due to the lengthy process, strict licensing requirements (e.g., financial stability, training, sleeping space), or generational or pervasive issues of substance abuse and mental health issues. Many states have implemented separate licensing, placement, and/or waiver processes for relatives interested in being a placement resource. Any such policies should be clearly described to staff and communicated to families. In states that currently lack such policies, creating them may open the door for relative placements that may have been made impossible due to old or non-violent criminal records, inadequate space in the home, or lack of financial resources.

MEASURE OTHER BENEFITS OF FAMILY FINDING. While positive permanency outcomes such as shorter stays in care, reunification, adoption, placements with relatives, and lower recidivism rates are the ultimate goal of all child welfare programs, including Family Finding, experts reported that service providers need to measure other child outcomes, and research and evaluation efforts need to incorporate other measures of success. Such broadened measures include child well-being and functioning, the child’s sense of belonging and self, changes in the child’s affect, and the child’s relationships and level of engagement with family (e.g., visitation with family, levels of emotional support). This knowledge may increase the commitment of all to further support the program and the relatives who, while unable to be a placement resource, become a permanent emotional support for children in foster care.

BUILD A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING AND RESPECT OF THE SOMETIMES CONFLICTING ROLES OF PARTIES. Joint trainings may bring about better collaboration between stakeholders. It may also be helpful for different stakeholders to know how appreciated they are by the others. Many of the judges credited the hard work of case workers and GALs as the motivating factor for children’s permanency. Similarly, many GALs spoke about how essential a thoughtful and compassionate case worker is to a child and the case. A better understanding of the roles and more intentional appreciation of each stakeholder may help support these groups as they try to encourage legal and emotional permanency for children and youth in foster care.

RESOURCES

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Child Welfare Information Gateway. Family-Centered Approach to Working with Families. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/famcentered/caseworkpractice/working.cfm>

Child Welfare Information Gateway. Family Engagement. http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_fam_engagement/f_fam_engagement.pdf

ChildFocus. A Guide to Finding and Involving Relatives at Every Stage of the Child Welfare Process. <http://childfocuspartners.com/wp-content/uploads/RelativeSearchGuide10-15.pdf>

Child Trends. Bringing Family to the Table: Tips and Techniques for Effective Family Engagement. <http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/2011-32FamilytoTable1.pdf>

FAMILY FINDING MODEL

Seneca Family of Agencies. Resources for Agencies Trained on the Family Finding Model. <http://www.senecacenter.org/familyfinding/resources>

Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center. Family Finding Series. <http://www.pacwcbt.pitt.edu/curriculum/207FamilyFindingSeries.htm>

The National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice and Permanency Planning. Six Steps to Find a Family: A Practice Guide to Family Search and Engagement. <http://www.nrcpfc.org/downloads/SixSteps.pdf>

Catholic Community Services of Western Washington and EMQ Children & Family Services. Family Search & Engagement: A Comprehensive Practice Guide. http://www.ccsww.org/site/DocServer/Family_Search_and_Engagement_Guide_CCS-EMQ.pdf?docID=641

Child Trends. Family Finding: Does Implementation Differ when Serving Different Child Welfare Populations? http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Child_Trends-2011_10_17_RB_FamilyFinding.pdf

Child Trends. Piecing Together the Puzzle: Tips and Techniques for Effective Discovery in Family Finding. http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Child_Trends-2011_12_01_RB_FamilyFindingTips.pdf

Child Trends. Client Voices: Youth, Parent, and Relative Perspectives on Family Finding. <http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/2013-23ClientVoices.pdf>

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Campbell, Kevin (2005). Six Steps for Family Finding. Center for Family Finding and Youth Connectedness. Resource Documents.

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