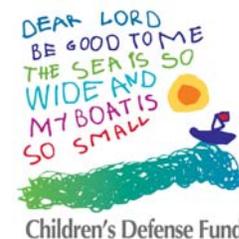


# Promising Approaches in Child Welfare: Helping Connect Children and Youth in Foster Care to Permanent Family and Relationships through Family Finding and Engagement



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## The importance of permanency for children and youth in foster care

Every child and youth who enters the foster care system has a goal of finding a permanent home, also known as “permanency.” The child welfare professionals work to achieve this permanency goal by reunifying the child with their parents or finding another permanent connection, such as adoption or legal guardianship. While permanency is a goal for all children in foster care, recent statistics show a growing trend in the rising number of children “aging out” of the system without a permanent connection to a family. Over 29,000 youths aged out of foster care in 2009, and many of these foster care alumni have to face problems of poverty, lack of health care, limited education, unemployment, homelessness, criminal justice system involvement, and teen pregnancy without the support of permanent families.

Outcomes for adolescents in foster care, particularly those who remain in the system and age out at age 18, are not good. These grim outcomes make older youth in foster care all too likely candidates for the Cradle to Prison Pipeline. The challenges older youth face when they age out of foster care are critical and can have harmful outcomes for those who don't make permanent connections to family. Permanent connections can increase the likelihood that youth will achieve stability and successfully transition to independent adulthood. New reforms and efforts made through family finding can help counteract these obstacles to permanency.

## What is Family Finding and Engagement and how does it help children and youth achieve permanency?

Family Finding and Engagement (also referred to as Family Search and Engagement, or Family Finding) is an intensive search method to find family members and other adults who would like to step in and care for children and youth in foster care who lack permanency. The goal of family finding is to locate long-term, caring, permanent connections and relationships for children and youth in foster care. The other key goal of family finding is to establish a long-term emotional support network with family members and other adults who may not be able to take the child into their home but who want to stay connected with the child. While family finding has resulted in permanent placements with relatives, the far more frequent outcome is to establish a permanent lifelong connection with a group of relatives who reconnect with the child and provide emotional and other types of support.

Family finding has targeted children who have been in out-of-home care for a long time, and has typically begun by addressing older youth in care. Armed with the information gathered through family finding, and trained in grief and loss counseling and in facilitating relationships with new-found relatives, social workers begin the process of re-connecting youth with family members.

## Promising outcomes from Family Finding for children and youth

The family finding method began out of a program established in Washington state in 2000, and as news of the program's success spread, so did the number of states starting to implement their own family finding programs. The preliminary results of these different programs show promising outcomes for children and youth served by family findings:

- The California Permanency Youth Project (CPYP) worked with 750 youth over seven years and found permanent connections for over 70 percent of the youth in the project, and 18 percent achieved legal permanence (guardianship, adoption, or reunification), and 16 percent were pursuing legal permanence at project's end.
- In San Bernardino, 75 percent of the CPYP youth had an established permanent connection by the end of the pilot, compared to only four percent of the non-CPYP youth. CPYP attributes this to the training the CPYP group received in both family finding and engagement and grief and loss training.
- Of the youth served by the Orange County CASA Family Finding project, 99 percent of youth learned more about their family and heritage, 97 percent increased family contact, and 89 percent have life-long connections. Approximately 10 percent of the youth served achieve legal status (adoption or legal guardianship) with their permanent connections.
- Florida's Kids Central served 164 children and 34 percent developed enduring connections and 23 percent achieved permanency as a result of family finding, for a total of 57 percent of their children having permanent connections.
- The Children's Home Society of North Carolina was only able to find an average of nine family members known for each child, but after implementing family findings staff were able to find an average of 53 family members for each child. At the conclusion of family finding services, each child typically had eight family members committed to maintaining ongoing relationships and two family members stating a desire to be considered a permanency resource.
- Four Oaks Family and Children's Services of Iowa did a family findings pilot study to find new or expanded connections for 31 children in foster care. At the end of the study, 29 of those children had a new connection – a 97 percent success rate.
- In 2009 the Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition of Missouri had 56 cases and 90 percent were connected with a relative and 70 percent were matched with adoptive parents, most but not all of them were relatives.

## Key factors to successful family finding programs

Advocates of family finding emphasize that certain components are key to successful family finding programs. To be successful for children in foster care, family finding practitioners must:

- **Collaborate with community partners.** It is essential to collaborate with all critical partners when helping youth find permanent connections – including the Family Decision Making staff, Permanency Placement staff, Court Appointed Special Advocates, group home staff, therapists, and other family members of the youth.
- **Be Youth-driven.** A successful permanency effort places the youth at the center of the search and decision making process.
- **Train staff in other resourceful skills.** It is important that staff working in family finding are trained in more than just search techniques. Staff need to be trained in *skilled interview techniques* necessary for identifying family strengths, resources, and connections; *successful engagement skills* to encourage family members or other adults to make a commitment to the child or youth; *grief and loss counseling* to help struggling youth realize they deserve permanency and a lifelong connection.

- **Provide wraparound services and support.** Bringing child welfare and mental health professionals together and supplying wraparound services contribute to the success of many programs. The majority of permanent connections involve some form of financial, medical or therapeutic support.
- **Persistence and a sense of urgency.** Youth and children in care have experienced many losses and it is important to understand the depth of their loneliness and how crucial it is to never stop looking for a permanent connections. A worker should never give up on finding permanency for a participant once having begun providing family finding and permanency services.
- **Address system barriers.** Be prepared to address several obstacles when implementing family findings, such as lack of resources, resistance within (and without) the agency, and existing policies. It is important to develop supervision standards and expectations, remove disincentives, and select key point people.
- **Change requires authority.** Champions at all levels of the organization are necessary to help deal with momentum loss when staff changes occur. In particular, the child welfare supervisor is the key role necessary to enable a shift in practice strategy as case workers will change their practice to the extent required by their supervisor. Creating supervisor checklists, developing an expectations tool, and addressing systemic resistance by training not just the case workers, but other stakeholders such as judges, CASAs, and attorneys, are important steps to implementing successful family findings programs.

## Challenges in implementing family finding programs

Many advocates believe a major problem with family finding is that it isn't being implemented soon enough. Family finding should be the first step taken when a child enter foster care to help prevent children from spending years in the foster care system. The major challenges to successfully implementing family finding and engagement include:

- **Administrative and bureaucratic barriers.** The lack of champions at all levels of the system is a major barrier to successfully implementing family findings. Policies that focus on safety to the exclusion of permanency and stability goals, and concerns that safety will be jeopardized if children have contact with families of origin also prevent agencies from moving forward with family finding.
- **Resistance from staff.** Case workers often view family finding as an additional burden they have to add to their already high caseloads and in insufficient timeframes.
- **Lack of training, practice and expertise.** Professionals working with family finding must be trained in more than just search techniques. Staff must have the ability to build strong relationships with the youth, successfully engage the family and adults, and counsel the youth in grief and loss in order to help them cope with their past experience and accept the reality that they deserve a permanent family. Insufficient follow up with the families once they are initially engaged is another challenge.
- **Lack of appropriate services.** Many agencies are unable to provide the supportive wraparound services that are critical to appropriately supporting these children and families
- **Misconceptions.** At different levels of the child welfare system there are misconceptions that can impair the successful implementation of family findings. Often judges, CASAs and other staff believe that the rest of the child's family will be just as "rotten" as the birth parents, and that a fresh start in an unrelated adoptive family would be better for children. Courts also may not perceive non-legal solutions, such as permanent life-long connections, as an appropriate solution. Some also believe that children must be stable in placement or treatment before considering family connections work, as opposed to seeing connections as an aid to stability. Lastly, and most unfortunately, some professional view older youth in foster care as "unadoptable."
- **Lack of a team framework**

## **Meeting the Goals of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act**

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (Fostering Connections) is new legislation that helps children and youth in foster care by promoting permanent family connections. Family finding assists the goals of Fostering Connections by identifying and connecting family to children who have been removed from their parent's home and placed into foster care. Fostering Connections requires states to make diligent efforts to identify and notify relatives whenever a child is removed from their home in order to prevent children from unnecessarily entering the foster care system or staying in care for long periods of time. Family finding efforts align with the requirement that states now have to identify and notify relatives.

Fostering Connections also established Family Connection grants, which can help agencies fund Family Finding and Engagement programs. The Family Connection grants are competitive grants that allow agencies to create or enhance programs that help children in or at risk of entering foster care reconnect with family members. These grants fund projects in several areas, including programs utilizing intensive family finding efforts to locate biological family and reestablish relationships

## **How do Family Finding and Engagement programs dismantle the Cradle to Prison Pipeline?**

Every child wants and needs to know where they came from, and whether there is anybody out there who can tell them any of their history. For older youth who have been in the foster care system for a long time or may be about to age out, this is especially crucial – and can mean the difference between success and failure in the world, between being able to sustain themselves in a law-abiding way or turning to a life of unemployment, homelessness, crime and incarceration. Family finding and engagement is an important tool that helps children in foster care break away from the Cradle to Prison Pipeline.

## **Family Finding Around the Country**

In pilot projects around the country, both private and public child welfare professionals have begun using Family Finding and Engagement. Below are examples of some different family findings programs that have been implemented to help children and youth find permanency:

- California Permanency Youth Project (CPYP)
- Catholic Community Services of Western Washington (CCSWW)
- CASAs Family Connections (Orange County, CA)
- Kids Central, FL
- A Family for Every Child (AFFEC) and the Department of Human Services, OR
- Children's Home Society of North Carolina (CHS) and the Department of Social Services, NC
- Four Oaks Family and Children's Services, IA
- Children's Services Society of Wisconsin (CSSW), WI
- The Hillside Institute for Family Connections, NY