

**A Promising Approach to Increasing Family Adoptions: Initiating
Family Finding Techniques at the Onset of Child Welfare Involvement**

Jean K. Elder, PhD, *J.K. Elder & Associates, Inc.*
David DeStefano, MA, *J.K. Elder & Associates, Inc.*
Richard Manuel, MBA, *Youth & Family Alternatives*

A Promising Approach to Increasing Family Adoptions: Initiating Family Finding Techniques at the Onset of Child Welfare Involvement

I. Introduction to the Problem and Overview of National Changes in Program and Policy Changes for Dependency Cases

Nearly 300,000 children nationwide are removed from their homes each year as a result of some form of abuse or neglect and these children are nearly twice as likely to be placed in the care of non-relatives as with relatives (46 compared with 24 percent) (U.S. DHHS, 2008). When children cannot be reunited with their parents, child welfare agencies, with oversight from the dependency court, bear the responsibility of securing a new permanent home or family setting for these children. The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 (P.L. 105-89) established legal requirements for the timely achievement of permanency for children who cannot return home. Nationally, children adopted through child welfare organizations have primarily been adopted through foster care, with 54% of children recently adopted as of July 2010 having been adopted by foster parents. Relative adoptions followed at 32% and 14% of adoptions were to non-relatives. These statistics actually represent an increase in relative adoptions when compared with data from previous years (U.S. Department of Health and Human services, 2012).

Not only did ASFA emphasize the importance of permanency for children, it also recognized well-being as a national goal for children in care. A permanent family setting is crucial to children's healthy development and social networks within family and community settings play critical roles in helping children form positive self-identities. However, placement in foster care can often disrupt children's social networks as family, friends and community ties weaken or become absent. From a setting theory perspective, continuous access to social networks is necessary for children's healthy adjustment to their new settings. Continuing regular interactions with those in their original social network is especially difficult for children who have been placed at a geographical distance from their communities and the frequent instability of foster care settings can hamper children and youths' development of new social networks. Youth who age out of foster care are particularly vulnerable; not only do they no longer have access to supportive child welfare services, but they often do not have strong social networks.

In contrast, stable family environments and strong social networks can serve as protective factors for the overall well-being of children and youth in foster care (Perry, 2006). For many youth, simply connecting or reconnecting them with family members and fostering life-long connections with other caring adults who can provide ongoing emotional support will increase their sense of self-efficacy and well-being and facilitate their ability to safely and successfully navigate their lives. In some cases, the identification of relatives and other caring adults can lead not only to emotional permanency, but to legal permanency in a family setting through adoption or guardianship.

In 1998, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (P.L. 110-351) was signed into law. This Act built upon the success and momentum of ASFA and provided additional reforms to the nation's child welfare system with an emphasis on promoting permanent family connections. Family Finding is well suited to supporting the goals and meeting the requirements of this legislation because it is designed to find and notify relatives of children's removal from home and ongoing dependency status as well as actively involve them in permanency planning. There are key provisions in the legislation that pertain to Family Finding and Connecting and Supporting Relative Caregivers; these include:

- Provides federal reimbursement to States choosing to provide assistance to grandparents and other relatives who become legal guardians of children for whom they have cared as foster parents;
- Requires relatives to be notified of a child's removal from home within 30 days of their removal;
- Codifies existing licensing standards for relatives becoming foster parents and requires a report on impact and next steps;
- Allows the child welfare system to utilize the Parent Locator Service;
- Requires reasonable efforts to place siblings together or, if placing them together is not possible, to make reasonable efforts to allow ongoing sibling interaction; and
- Provides competitive Family Connection grants to programs to initiate or expand programs that reconnect children and youth in or at risk of entering out-of-home care with family members.

II. Family Finding

A. An Introduction to Family Finding

The development of the Family Finding Model occurred amidst legislation mandating child welfare agencies to expedite safe and permanent placements and a growing awareness of the need for children and youth to experience stability, connectedness, and ongoing social and emotional support. The Family Finding Model was created by Kevin Campbell based on the belief that every child deserves lifelong connections, families and youth deserve to know the truth about each other, and family members should be given a chance to help. By locating and nurturing preexisting relationships with family and community, caseworkers have an opportunity to expand and strengthen the base of social and emotional support and increase the likelihood of stable permanent placements with relatives. Further, it maintains connections with extended family and community networks and creates continuity for children who are experiencing the disruption of out-of-home placements.

Family Finding is a step-by-step model designed to locate relatives of children in foster care with the intention of actively engaging them in the provision of emotional support, providing family connectedness, and increasing the opportunity for permanent placement with a relative caregiver.

The Family Finding model has six distinct steps:

Step One: Discovery

With the goal of achieving more options for support and planning, the caseworker identifies at least 40 family members for each child through interviews, case record reviews, mobility mapping, and electronic search strategies. This extensive search includes efforts to identify other adults who can or have in the past been a key supporter of the child or parents.

Step Two: Engagement

In order to involve those who know the child best and have a historic and/or inherent connection to the child, the caseworker contacts and engages family members and other supportive adults and asks them to assist with planning and decision-making for the youth's future.

Step Three: Planning

The caseworker holds meetings and brings together identified family members and others who care about the child to learn more about the young person's immediate and lifelong need for support and affection. Participants must have a voice in the planning process and should be urged to consider become part of the youth's lifetime network.

Step Four: Decision Making

The lifetime network works as a team and with a sense of urgency to make key decisions to support the immediate and long-term need for safety, permanency, and well-being. This step underscores the urgency of achieving legal permanency.

Step Five: Evaluation

The lifetime network team implements an inclusive and individualized plan to achieve legal and emotional permanency for the youth. One member of the team is chosen to organize and facilitate future meetings and decision-making and adults who are caring for the child have adequate support and connections with individuals who are important to the youth. Careful consideration is given to the following questions:

- 1) If this iteration of our plan fails, will the child remain or return to the foster care system?
- 2) Have we identified and engaged an adequate level of enduring support for the child and their caregivers?
- 3) Has the team created a plan that includes family members and other adults willing to offer their support if the plan "A" option is unsuccessful?
- 4) Are there at least three options?

Step Six: Follow-up on Supports

The lifetime network will actively support youth and caregivers to ensure they access services, supports, and key relationships. The team assesses the need for ongoing supports and encourages sharing among team members.

Though it is a step-by-step model, Family Finding is not a linear process. Case workers should progress through the steps for each potential contact as they are identified. Thus, it is likely that case workers are simultaneously engaged in multiple steps with multiple potential contacts.

B. Overall data on the successes of Family Finding and its usage nationwide

Since its inception in 2000, the Family Finding model has been implemented in numerous locations nationwide. Reports and feedback from implementation sites indicate it is a promising practice for finding permanent family connections that improve outcomes and increase support, stability and continuity for children and youth in care. For example, Santa Clara County, CA has reported that between November of 2003 and December of 2004, 32% of youth receiving Family Finding services were reunified and living with family. Additionally, 61% of youth were living in their community with durable connections to family. EMQ Families First, a California based nonprofit reports that the average time to place a child using Family Finding strategies ranges between 6 months and a year. Another Family Finding effort in California, the California Permanency for Youth Project, evaluated 10 counties and found that 74% of youth who started receiving services in 2006 achieved permanency and that 47% of those who began in 2007 achieved permanency. There was also an increase in sibling connections for children and youth who participated in the project. A Family Finding pilot at Four Oaks Family and Children's Services of Iowa found new or expanded connections for 97% of children in their pilot group.

Despite anecdotal evidence and reported successes, there has not been a rigorous evaluation of the model. However, Child Trends is in the process of conducting a multi-site evaluation that will be completed in 2013. This evaluation will include a comparison of youth who are randomly assigned to receive Family Finding services with those who do not and will also include a comparison of older foster youth whose permanency goal is no longer reunification with children and youth who are just entering care.

Review of successful Family Finding programs indicate that the successful incorporation of the model requires an urgent and persistent youth driven process that is supported by organizational policies, proper training, and community partnerships. It requires skilled casework and sensitivity to balance the various and often conflicting goals of different family members and will not work without building rapport and trust.

III. Florida's Lead Agency System of Care

An additional legislative and administrative reform helped make Florida an ideal environment for the successful implementation of the Family Finding Model. Florida's transition from a public child welfare system to a community-based care approach was initiated in 1996 with the intent of strengthening the support and commitment of local communities to abused and neglected children and their families and to increase the quality, efficiency and accountability of in-home and out-of-home care child welfare services. The responsibilities of community-based lead agencies are defined by the original legislative statute (s., 409.1671, F.S.), and include the ability to:

- Coordinate, integrate and manage all foster care, adoption, and related child and family services in the community;
- Ensure continuity of care from entry to exit for all children referred;
- Accept accountability for achieving the federal and state outcomes and performance standards for safety, permanency, and child well-being;
- Have the capability to serve all children referred from protective investigations and court systems; and
- Ensure staff providing services receive the training required by the Department of Children and Families (DCF).

The implementation of community-based care has allowed lead agencies to engage directly with families within their communities to define needs and dedicate available funds to support programming and services designed to address those needs. Kids Central Inc. began operations as the Community-Based Care nonprofit Lead Agency for Florida's Judicial Circuit 5 in 2003. It has resulted in many locally driven quality improvement and best practice initiatives, including implementation of a Family Finding program.

IV. YFA Success with FF in a Lead Agency Setting

A. Introduce YFA and how it fits into FL and FF Youth and Family Alternatives (YFA)

As the lead agency in Circuit 5, Kids Central Inc. (KCI) administers a contract with Youth and Family Alternatives (YFA) to provide adoption services. Both KCI and YFA have embraced and fully integrated the Family Finding techniques into their service delivery systems. In 2008, when Family Finding was introduced in Florida's 5th Judicial Circuit, Kevin Campbell was hired as a consultant to assist with the implementation and training of case management staff. The following year, KCI was one of 24 organizations in the United States awarded a three year Family Connection Grant intended to implement activities geared towards promoting family connections for children involved with or at risk of entering the child welfare system.

KCI and YFA have thoroughly incorporated the techniques and tenets of Family Finding into daily practice and organizational culture and constantly strive to identify and support positive family connections. YFA maintains this focus on family connections throughout the entire adoption process. The approach is multi-faceted and begins with

seeking professional applicants willing to embrace the philosophy during the hiring process. Likewise, when recruiting potential adoptive families, the agency seeks adoptive applicants who embrace the importance of supportive family relations and are willing to maintain lasting biological family connections. These efforts include striving for siblings to be placed together and maintaining ongoing contact with siblings and biological family even when family placement is not a viable option. The need to maintain family connections is also emphasized in a 30 hour class that is required for non relatives prior to an adoption home study.

Because of these efforts, YFA has increased confidence that adoptive families will maintain family connections after adoptions are finalized. In the past, maintaining family connections would not have been a major focus of a match staffing with a prospective adoptive applicant. With an emphasis on strategically selecting families that are open to maintaining positive relative connections, YFA has been able to not only assist children with maintaining relationships with kin after adoption finalization, but has assisted the adoptive families with the back-up systems and support that they so often need as parents.

The organizational commitment of the Lead Agency and the provider agencies to Family Finding is key to its success. As one employee from YFA shared, “I was initially skeptical of Family Finding and felt it was something caseworkers should already be doing. However, I noticed early on that our lead agency, Kids Central Inc., seemed to really embrace the Family Finding philosophy and that they were ready and willing to put the resources in place that would assist workers in learning and implementing the Family Finding principles.” In other words, Family Finding was not the latest initiative that would be replaced with the next best thing when it came along. In Circuit 5, Family Finding was here to stay. With success stories that were shared throughout Circuit 5, and with the knowledge that the program was not going anywhere, perception began to change within Circuit 5, especially as more and more workers began to have success with the principles, resulting in more children building relative connections, and the number of children in foster care beginning to show sharp reductions.

Beyond the internal work that Kids Central and its provider agencies do to support the Family Finding process, Kids Central reaches out to the legal community and includes them in trainings to ensure that they understand the vision and process of Family Finding. This is vital because it provides the attorneys with the knowledge to accurately communicate case goals, successes and challenges to the court.

B. Positive and Interesting Outcomes

YFA’s dedicated and consistent efforts to locate and strengthen family connections have resulted in positive outcomes. First, the agency has experienced a significant decrease in caseload. Specifically, the adoption caseload has been cut by more than half with a decrease from 247 children on 12/1/09 to 119 children on 12/1/12. Because relative adoptions tend to be finalized more quickly than non relative adoptions, taking an average of 21 days rather than the 42 days in Circuit 5. The approach has also

increased the likelihood of relative placements with 518 children in relative care in October 2009 compared with 670 children in relative care in October 2012. Decreasing caseloads and time spent in out-of-home care has ultimately resulted in measureable cost savings.

Of all of these outcomes and accomplishments, it is particularly noteworthy that adoption professionals at YFA have managed to reverse a trend that has long been the norm throughout the United States, the fact that children adopted through the child welfare system have predominantly been adopted by their foster parents. Since YFA assumed responsibility for adoption services in Florida’s Fifth Judicial Circuit in December 2009, there has been a significant/remarkable increase in the rate of relative adoptions throughout the circuit at the same time that foster parent adoptions have declined.

Comparison of Placement Types

	Circuit 5 (7/11- 6/12)	National Average
Relative or Family Contact	62%	32%
Recruit	16%	15%
Foster	22%	53%

This is important because relative adoptions generally have several advantages beyond the fact that they are finalized more quickly. These include the preexistence of natural relationships between the adoptive family, the child, and extended family members. Children and youth adopted by families are also more likely to remain connected with parents, siblings and extended family members.

These numbers do not tell the entire story. Not only is the process achieving positive results, but the agency is doing an excellent job of balancing the legal and emotional needs of children and families. While constantly striving to achieve permanency for children, the agency philosophy and casework efforts nurture family connections and the emotional well-being of children and their families.

V. Why

We believe that the early initiation of Family Finding strategies to build a support network and create connections is the main reason that YFA is achieving an increased rate of family/biological adoptions. Initiating Family Finding at the onset of involvement with the child welfare systems differs from in many locales where family finding has focused on youth who have already been in out-of-home care for an extended period of time. There are logical advantages to finding and engaging families early in the process and maintaining their involvement throughout the adoption process. Beyond increasing

the likelihood of family adoptions, these include: creating an expanded and improved support system for children and adoptive families, increasing the investment in the success of the permanency plan, promoting lifelong connections, and emphasizing the importance of sibling relationships.

After completing a thorough review of the literature and study of Family Finding and Engagement (FFE) pilots, California's Blue Ribbon Commission on Foster Care recommended that child welfare agencies: (1) use FFE at the earliest possible point in dependency cases and (2) ensure that foster children maintain relationships with family members and other important people in their lives. The recommendation to begin the process at the earliest possible point is based on their conclusion that if family finding is conducted earlier, "Youth could avoid years in the dependency system if relative placements are found sooner, and can endure the burden of foster care better when they have supportive permanency relationships. Waiting until placement decisions are being made before requiring family searches can come too little too late." Based on their study of sites in California, the Commission also predicted that early implementation of FFE will produce substantial savings because the sooner youth are placed with permanent families, the sooner the savings to the State begin."

These sentiments are mirrored by those of one of Youth and Family Alternatives Adoption Case Manager who stated, "Being on the Adoption's side gives me the unfortunate opportunity to see what happens to kids when Family Finding is not implemented or not implemented to its fullest potential. I think that Family Finding needs to be a greater importance and needs to be implemented on the onset of the case. If this was done, it could potentially eliminate the need for foster placements! I have done Family Finding with cases where children have been in foster care for years and was able to place them with relatives! All the years these children have spent in foster care could possibly have been alleviated if someone would have taken the time and effort to do so in the beginning. My hope is that one day family finding will be THE Priority at the onset of an abuse report being called in. No one could ever give all these children their childhoods back, but we could do a better job at preventing future childhoods from being taken away!"

The importance of this caseworker's perspective can not be overlooked because "buy-in" and commitment to the model from caseworkers is vital for the successful implementation of Family Finding services. When the program was first introduced, caseworkers expressed concern that they wouldn't have the time to devote to Family Finding in addition to their existing workload. However, as the program has improved outcomes, increased client satisfaction and decreased caseloads it has resulted in decreased stress and workloads for workers. One manager shared, "The Family Finding principles that have been embraced within Circuit 5 have been successful for our children. Family Finding is no longer a set of policies and procedures that must be followed, but is instead a way of life in everyday casework activity."

VI. How

Kids Central's provider agencies initiate the Family Finding process at the opening of each case and there are established procedures for ensuring that prior Family Finding discoveries and information transfers to YFA when the adoption process is launched. The coordination between the two providing agencies, The Centers and Children's Home Society, and YFA is facilitated by the Lead Agency arrangement relationship and reinforced by policies and procedures. For example, a transition staffing occurs prior to case transfer at the time of filing the Termination of Parental Rights. This staffing is intended to assign an adoption caseworker and to complete transitional activities. Transitional activities include discussing Family Finding efforts that have already been made and those that still need to be completed. If Family Finding has not been properly implemented, this staffing provides both agencies a head start in addressing or readdressing Family Finding long before termination of parental rights is granted and the case is officially staffed to YFA. By initiating communication with the case management agencies long before a case is staffed to YFA, we are able to prevent cases from being transferred to adoption and then lingering because Family Finding was not completed." At this point, caseworkers from both agencies are guided by an Adoption Case Transfer Form which includes a checklist to support a smooth case transfer, ensure nothing is overlooked, and sustain the Family Finding discussion. Some key items pertaining to the Family Finding process on the transfer form include:

- Siblings and the need for sibling visitation plans if the siblings are separated. This includes requirements to document efforts to place siblings together and document sibling visitation plans;
- Required Family Finding documents (Family Tree, Chronological notes documenting Family Finding activities, Family Team Conferencing staffing forms, documentation from the Decision Making meetings, and contact information gathered during file scrubs, and names and numbers of verified contacts); and
- A section with space for Kids Central caseworkers to include a narrative describing Family Finding activities that have occurred in each of the Family Finding Model's steps.

This coordination is built into the process at several other points as well. For instance, YFA caseworkers attend permanency staffings before the case is transferred for adoption services and there is also a joint home visit to the child's placement during which both caseworkers provide information on permanency plans.

VII. Lessons Learned and Implications

After achieving success helping children and youth who have been in out-of-home care for an extended amount of time, Family Finding is also demonstrating that it is effective with children and youth who are just beginning involvement with the child welfare dependency system. Research from the field indicates there are often

demographic differences in Family Finding at the onset of involvement with the child welfare system as opposed to with children and youth who have been in out-of-home care for an extended period of time. For example, youth who have been in care for an extended period tend to be older than those who are just entering the dependency system. There are often differences in goals and parental involvement when Family Finding is initiated early. Specifically, biological parents are more likely to be involved and reunification is more likely to be a goal. (Child Trends, 2011) These differences raise a number of practice considerations and differences that should be incorporated into methodology. For instance, there are differences in engaging family members when reunification is still an option rather than when it is not. Likewise, caseworkers should be knowledgeable about the differences of engaging family members to provide support to meet the unique needs of youth who will soon age out of the system with those of young children. Caseworkers need clarity about the various potential roles and different levels of prospective involvement of family members and need to be able to accurately express these possibilities to family members.

Family Findings success across the spectrum of dependency cases reminds us of the ongoing importance of reaching out and seeking family involvement. Families should be sought first and even when they are not a placement option – they should not be given up on. Future efforts should consider the efforts of reaching out to the family even earlier and the possible contributions that family support networks and connections may have during the diversion process.

