

FAMILY FINDING: DOES IMPLEMENTATION DIFFER WHEN SERVING DIFFERENT CHILD WELFARE POPULATIONS?

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Overview

The family finding model provides child welfare professionals with techniques for identifying and engaging family members and other adults who care about a child placed in foster care. 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 first 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 not only 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, but also 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 or steps, 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. The engagement phase also includes 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 meeting 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.¹⁻³

Over the past decade there has been growing evidence and awareness that many youth who age out of foster care have negative experiences and outcomes in the years immediately following their stays in foster care.^{4,5} The number of young people aging out has increased steadily since 1998, exceeding 29,000 in 2008.⁶ Over the past decade, the family finding approach has most commonly been used to find and secure supportive family networks for youth who have lingered in the child welfare system. These are typically older youth who have lost connections to their birth family and kin networks as a result of having spent many years in foster care.

Evaluating Family Finding

Child Trends researchers are currently evaluating family finding programs in multiple localities in five states. At annual site visits to each program site, practitioners and program managers have

acknowledged the need for family finding services among children who have lost connections to their family, and, in particular, those who will likely emancipate from foster care. In addition, Child Trends researchers have heard from many local practitioners and program managers who also see a need to implement the family finding model when children first enter out-of-home care. These practitioners believe that if the intensive search and engagement techniques can be utilized as soon as the child protective services agency is made aware of a child and family, perhaps foster care entry could be avoided. Alternatively, if entry is deemed necessary, family finding would increase the chances of placement with a relative, reduce the length of foster care stays, and support the maintenance of connections with relatives and other individuals known to the child.

In the majority of the family finding evaluation sites, programs are designed to target older foster youth who have spent a number of years in foster care. However, in a few sites, family finding is targeted to children and their families as the child first enters out-of-home care. Specifically, for this brief we examined the differences between two evaluation sites—one implementing family finding with children “new to out-of-home care” (Approach A)¹ and one implementing family finding for children who have been “lingering” in foster care (Approach B). In the sections that follow, we present preliminary findings on differences in program approach and context, characteristics of the children served, and the program inputs and outputs in the two sites. The information presented in this brief may help child welfare agencies and program planners consider how best to structure family finding services and consider the best population to target for services. Findings represent child-level programmatic data from a two-year time period (October 2008 through November 2010).

Data Sources

Extensive field work is an important component of the ongoing Child Trends evaluation that provides a unique opportunity not only to examine the family finding approach in each locality, but also to examine practitioners’ and program managers’ thoughts on how best to utilize the family finding techniques. Child Trends’ researchers interviewed family finding and child welfare agency staff to learn about their experiences and opinions concerning family finding, and about the local context (both in terms of location and approach) within which the program operates. Qualitative information was obtained during visits to the evaluation sites in 2009 and 2010.

In addition to field work, an extensive web-based database was developed to document family finding activities. Family finding workers enter program data into the database capturing child characteristics; number and types of family connections at the start of family finding and those discovered through family finding; number of family meetings, including documenting family members invited and attending the meetings; and results of the meetings. The database also captures the duration of the family finding activities and the degree to which family finding activities are implemented. The database allows for comparisons across different evaluation sites. The findings presented in this brief pertain to all children with closed family finding cases.

Program Context

The two evaluation sites include family finding workers who work for private organizations under contract to public child welfare agencies as well as family finding workers who are public child welfare agency employees. In both sites, a specialized worker is trained in the family finding techniques and conducts the family finding steps while consulting with the child’s case carrying worker.

¹ Children are eligible for family finding services in this site if this is their first stay in foster care. Cases may include siblings of these children who have previously or are currently in foster care.

Program context differs across the two sites due to varying service locations. The program serving children new to care operates family finding in one urban county. The program serving children lingering in care operates across nine counties—representing urban, suburban, and rural areas within one state.

Program Approach

The general approach of the family finding model is focused around the child, and it requires a process that is sensitive to the needs and emotional readiness of the child to accept family members as supports and potential placement resources. The intent of the family finding model is to identify the needs of the child and work with the family to determine if and how they can meet those needs. The child may be dealing with residual feelings of abandonment, or may not remember family members and may be overwhelmed by the number of new people being introduced into his or her life. As a result, any plans for ongoing support and communication between the family and the child should directly relate to the child's readiness to accept that contact.

In analyzing program Approach A, the intervention tends to have a stronger focus on the birth parent than through Approach B (in which children lingering in care, many of whom no longer have contact with their birth parents, are served). Thus, with Approach A, the focus or “target” of the family finding intervention is no longer only the child. The focus becomes two-pronged: strengthening the child's support network and engaging relatives, while also developing and fostering supportive relationships between the relatives and birth parents (most of whom are making efforts to reunify with their children).

Child Characteristics

The characteristics of children served differ across the two program approaches. On average, Approach A (new to out-of-home care) serves younger children than Approach B (lingering in care) (4 years of age compared with 14 years of age, $p < .001$). The two programs also differ in the race/ethnicity of the children served reflecting differences in the general child welfare populations in the two localities. In general, Approach A serves a smaller percentage of white and African American children than Approach B (6% compared with 31%, 30% compared with 54%, respectively) but a greater proportion of Hispanic children and American Indian/Alaskan Native (23% compared with 5%, 10% compared with 0%, respectively).

Not surprisingly, the permanency goals and placements of the children served by the two programs differ (See Table 1). Children who are new to out-of-home care (Approach A) are more likely to have a goal of reunification (40% compared with 4%), multiple goals (26% compared with 11%), or have no goal established (10% compared with 0%), compared with children served by Approach B. Children served by Approach A are more likely to be living in a relative foster home and less likely to be living in a group home than children served by Approach B (24% compared with 6%, 4% compared with 28%, respectively).

TABLE 1. Child Welfare Characteristics

Child characteristics	Children Served	
	Approach A New to care (N=70) %*	Approach B Lingering in (N=196) %*
	Permanency goal (at time of family finding referral)	
Reunification	40	4
Adoption (by either relative or non-relative)	3	38
Guardianship (by either relative or non-relative)	9	43
Independent living	0	1
Another planned permanent living arrangement	0	1
Multiple goals	26	11
No goal established yet	10	0
Other	1	1
Unknown	11	2
Placement type (at time of family finding referral)		
Foster family (relative)	24	6
Foster family (non-relative)	49	50
Group home	4	28
Residential treatment program	4	10
Living with birth parent	6	1
Other	1	4
Unknown	11	2

* Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Program Inputs

Also of interest to program planners and developers are the program inputs. To compare the intensity of family finding activities undertaken in each site, we examined the length of the family finding service intervention in both programs. In addition, Table 2 presents information on the average number of contacts made between the family finding worker and family members, as well as the average number of family meetings held.

- *Service length.* The family finding model is intended to be a short-term intervention of two to three months. However, both approaches are serving each case longer than originally anticipated. Cases are served on average five months in both sites.
- *Contact with family members.* In the database, family finding workers document when they have any type of two-way communication with family members. As shown in Table 2, there is a slight difference in the average number of family connections, i.e. relatives, with whom the family finding worker typically interacts with per child, across the two programs. The numbers of family meetings that are either facilitated by the family finding worker or by the child's caseworker also differ slightly across programs. Children new to out-of-home care have, on average, a slightly higher number of family meetings than the children lingering in care (2.1 compared with 1.6, $p < .1$). In addition, there appear to be considerably more interactions between the family finding worker and the family connection, for children new to care than for children lingering in care (44.9 compared with 21.3, $p < .05$).

TABLE 2. Contacts with Family

Average Number of	Approach A (N=70)	Approach B (N=196)
Family connections that have contact with family finding worker	5.1	5.7
Family meetings per child	2.1	1.6
Interactions across all connections (per child)	44.9	21.3

Program Outputs

Tables 3 to 5 present preliminary findings on program outputs. Outputs include baseline and discovered relatives, as well as numbers of relatives that are invited to and attend family meetings.

- *Baseline and discovered connections.* Baseline connections are family members or other supportive connections known at the time family finding services begin. Discovered connections are family members uncovered through family finding activities. As shown in Table 3, the number of family members known at baseline appears similar across children in the two programs, although lingering children served by Approach B tend to have more connections identified at baseline. Over one third (35%) of the lingering children has nine or more family connections known at baseline. The vast majority of the children in both approaches have at least one connection discovered through family finding (91% for children new to out-of-home care and 87% of those lingering in care).

TABLE 3. Number of Family Connections

	Approach A (N=70) %*	Approach B (N=196) %*
Number of family members or other supportive connections		
Baseline		
0-4	39	30
5-8	46	35
9-13	13	24
14-25	3	11
26-39	0	0
40-59	0	0
60+	0	0
Newly discovered through family finding		
0-4	19	18
5-8	4	5
9-13	14	7
14-25	23	18
26-39	30	15
40-59	6	14
60+	4	24
Any new connections discovered	91	87
* Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.		

As shown by Table 4, on average, more family members are “discovered” through family finding with Approach B than through Approach A (35 compared with 22, $p < .01$). It is worth noting, however, that family finding still increases the numbers of family members or other connections by more than three times for those new to care (Approach A).

TABLE 4. Average Number of Family Connections

Average number of family members (or other supportive connections)	Approach A (N=70)	Approach B (N=196)
At <u>baseline</u> (before FF begins)	6	7
<u>Discovered</u> (through FF activities)	22	35

- *Family meetings.* Table 5 presents the average number of family members engaged through family finding. Evidence of family engagement is shown by relatives being invited to and attending family meetings. As noted below, the average number of family members who are invited to a family meeting is greater for lingering children served by Approach B (7 compared with 3, $p < .001$). However, the average number of family members who attend a family meeting for a specific child new to care is the same as the number for children lingering in care. A greater percentage of family members attend the family meetings for children new-to-care (11% compared with 7%, $p < .01$) and of those invited, a greater percentage attend the meetings (92% compared with 57%, $p < .001$).

TABLE 5. Family Meetings

Average number of family members (or other supportive connections)	Approach A (N=70)	Approach B (N=196)
<u>Invited</u> to family meeting	3	7
<u>Attending</u> family meeting	3	3
Average percentage (%) of all family connections (or other supportive connections)		
<u>Invited</u> to family meeting	11	12
<u>Attending</u> family meeting	11	7
Of those <u>invited</u> to a family meeting, % who <u>attend</u>	92	57

Lessons Learned from Family Finding

Qualitative information gathered during program site visits provides some insight into the findings presented. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with family finding workers, foster care caseworkers, supervisors, and managers. This information is provided below.

- *Service duration and pace.* Although the overall duration of family finding cases is similar across programs, the pace of the work may vary as the different components of the model are implemented. For example, when serving children that are new to the system, prior to initiating family finding, birth parents seem to need a stabilization period during which they can adjust to child protective services' involvement in their lives. After the birth parents have had time to adjust and the case carrying social worker has stabilized the case, the pace of family finding picks up.

For children who have been lingering in care, the pace of family finding may be steady early on in the process once relatives are found and engaged; however, the pace may slow when the family finding worker completes his/her involvement (e.g., after the family meetings have occurred and plans for relatives to support the child have been established). Reintroducing family members into a child's life appears to be a more delicate and time consuming process for Approach B. Family finding workers and caseworkers often noted the need to involve the child's therapist. During the site visit to the program serving children new to care (Approach A), there was no mention of involving children's therapists to introduce the child to family, whereas a therapist is sometimes involved in Approach B.

There were also differences reported among reactions from the children's caseworkers, as well as in the time and willingness they have to work with the family finding workers. Caseworkers at the front end of the system have more pressure to perform in a timely manner (usually within timeframes of 90 days or less) and have less time to collaborate with additional, specialized workers. Workers who serve children lingering in care may be more accustomed to sharing responsibility of their cases with other specialized workers, while workers who serve cases new to the system are more likely to have sole responsibility of the case.

Data collected from site visits also suggest that the priorities at different stages of a case may affect the implementation of family finding. The child welfare agency's overall goal is to seek legal permanency for children while maintaining the child's safety and well-being. Public agency staff expressed the importance of legal permanency, in addition to securing emotional supports for the child, yet admitted that these two goals may be in conflict at different points in a case. Legal permanency may outweigh the importance of securing emotional supports for children, especially for cases new to out-of-home care. Workers are focused on finding stable placements for children since they cannot remain safely at home. Ideally these placements would be with a relative. As a result, the caseworkers' goals are to assess relatives to determine appropriateness for placement. If a relative is ruled out for placement, caseworkers may not feel responsible for promoting or encouraging relatives' ongoing participation in the case. Caseworkers may see value in the child having family connections, but do not have the time to coordinate additional visits and facilitate ongoing communication.

For children lingering in foster care (Approach B), site visit data suggest that caseworkers tend to concentrate more on securing emotional supports for the youth since the likelihood of finding a permanent placement for older youth decreases over time. The achievement of legal permanency is still important, but may not be as central to the case.

- *Discovery.* As shown in Table 3, cases served with Approach B tend to have slightly more family connections identified at the start of the case. During site visits, respondents noted that birth parents associated with cases served by Approach B are not ready sources of information on family members for children lingering in care. However, the child's case record may be an extensive resource as family finding workers mine the records for information on birth parents, relatives, and other kin. Due to the child's longer stay in care, there is much more documentation on the child's case which provides more information about any persons who might have been associated with the case throughout the child's stay in foster care. Site visit respondents noted that there are times when the case record may be outdated or provide inaccurate information, but it is often a good source for clues to build upon with more extensive searches using other methods (internet searches, talking with relatives, etc.). With cases new to out-of-home care, generally the birth parents are still involved in the case; however, they may not be forthright with names of relatives because they may not want family to know about their involvement with the public agency, or they may not trust the agency due to residual anger about having their children removed from their homes. Additionally, some birth parents are unable to provide updated information about family members because they are isolated and disconnected themselves. However, respondents did note that when birth parents are engaged in the family finding process, many can be great resources.
- *Family engagement.* As shown in Table 2, both programs interact with a similar number of family connections per case. There appear to be considerably more interactions between

the family finding worker and family connections on behalf of children new to care compared with those lingering in care (44.9 compared with 21.3, $p < .05$).

Engaging family members often requires different skills when serving different target populations. For example, interactions between a family finding worker and relatives can be more confusing when the child is new to out-of-home care. Relatives can be focused on wanting to be a placement resource while the agency is still focused on reunification with the birth parent. Family members may not understand or know how to navigate the balance between supporting the child and being respectful of the birth parent. It takes many conversations to clearly articulate the purpose of family finding when legal permanency is not yet an option. These challenges may explain why there are a much larger number of interactions that occur between family finding workers and family members.

Also, the inclusion of relatives early in the case planning process may produce tension between the birth parent and the relative with regard to making decisions about the child. Birth parents may feel threatened by the presence of a relative who may be able to take better care of their child. However, during focus groups, some birth parents expressed an understanding of the need to have “a back-up plan” should reunification efforts fail, and their role in the identification of relatives and other supports empowered them in making plans for their child should reunification efforts fail. One birth mother described family finding as similar to having a will or a guardian for the child if something were to happen to her. Another relative described family finding as building the child’s network so that foster care is not the only option.

In addition to engaging relatives, family finding workers serving children new to out-of-home care reported that they interact often with the children’s birth parents. While family finding workers did not view themselves primarily as parent advocates, they acknowledged that this was a component of their position since they need to engage the parent in discussions about safety, permanency, and supports for the child. Family finding workers also noted that their provision of additional supportive services to the parent, such as transporting them to appointments or facilitating parent-child visitations, helps to build trust and facilitates birth parents’ engagement in the family finding process.

Site visit information from Approach B (children lingering in care) suggests that when the child first entered care, some relatives isolated themselves from the birth parent because they did not want to be associated with the circumstances involving the case. They may have attempted to support this parent numerous times in the past. This prior involvement often contributes to the “disconnect” between family members and the child. Years later, the family finding workers have to work at reintroducing the family to the child and educating them of the child’s need to be connected to family. In addition, for older youth who are close to emancipation, site visit participants noted that family members may prefer to communicate with the child outside of agency oversight. This may be due to prior negative experiences with the agency or a fear of disclosing family information to the agency. Therefore, some family members may resist engaging with the family finding process if they feel that they can reach out to the child on their own. This reluctance on the part of relatives to be involved with birth parents, or their desire to maintain distance from the child welfare system, may contribute to the lower number of interactions for family finding workers in Approach B program.

Despite the varying issues that should be considered when engaging family, site visit participants from both programs stressed the need to be nonjudgmental, patient, and

empathetic with the family. They pointed to the importance of placing control of the family finding case into the hands of the family so the family members take ownership of the child and feel empowered to make decisions about the well-being of the child.

- *Family meetings.* Family meetings are facilitated by family finding workers in order to gather family members together to discuss the needs of the child and to develop plans to support the child. Both approaches are conducting, on average, the same number of meetings, and meetings typically involve a similar number of connections across the two approaches. However, the proportion of invited family members that attends meetings is substantially larger for children new to out-of-home care (Approach A) than for children lingering in care (Approach B). These preliminary findings warrant further examination as the differences could reflect the program's greater efforts at engagement and ability to schedule and coordinate a meeting because family members are not yet as distant to the case.

In situations in which relatives are unable to be placement resources, site visit participants indicated that plans for emotional support for children new to care (Approach A) are often targeted to birth parent supports to bolster reunification efforts and to create back-up plans. For example, family finding workers will talk about certain triggers for the birth parent that may indicate they are struggling to care for children. These triggers will signal family members to step in and intervene. Plans are developed to “check in” on the parents and assist with adhering to requirements for the case plan. For children lingering in foster care (Approach B), family meetings are focused on building supports around the child. For example, families may make plans to contact the child (e.g., by phone or in writing), to provide day or overnight visits, or to provide occasional material support for the child.

Implications

Although family finding was initially developed as a tool for helping children lingering in foster care reconnect with family members, it is fast becoming a tool that child welfare agencies want to utilize with all cases. As a result, child welfare agencies currently implementing family finding services, as well as those agencies planning to implement these services, should examine closely the implications of serving differing target populations and the capacity of their programs to support the different program approaches. Specifically, the following issues should be considered:

- *Timing of the intervention.* Site visit participants noted that the slower pace of casework for cases involving older foster youth may be more conducive to family finding. There are fewer court appearances and infrequent (if any) child-parent visitations or other requirements compared to cases new to the system. This appeared to make coordination with a family finding worker easier for the child's caseworker. In contrast, the faster pace of casework involving children first entering out-of-home care may negatively impact the fragile relationship between the caseworker and birth parent as they work toward reunification. However, family finding efforts among children new to care can be useful for opening up lines of communication between family members, resulting in more appropriate and focused discussions between relatives and birth parents about the needs of the child. Caseworkers working with family finding workers on cases new to out-of-home care commented that their focus is on getting the child back in the parent's home, so interacting and coordinating with another worker—the family finding worker—can be time-consuming and feel intrusive. Administrators should consider the most appropriate timing for initiating family finding services during less sensitive periods in a case (for example, initiating family finding earlier, during the investigation process period, rather than immediately after a child has been removed).

- *Family engagement practices.* Site visit participants noted that it is important for the caseworkers and family finding workers to be sensitive in approaching families and to center the conversation on the needs of the child, not on past negative agency experiences or on the fact the family may be unable to be a placement resource for the child. This approach requires strong relationship-building skills, especially with cases involving children new to care when caseworkers are often developing rapport with birth parents who are often upset about having their child removed from their home and confused and anxious about the child protective services process. Building rapport with the birth parent during this initial phase is thought to ensure more commitment to reunification efforts and cooperation with family finding. Yet, it is also a time when birth parents may not wish to cooperate with family members, so family finding must be conducted in a sensitive and thoughtful way. Implementing family finding encourages an agency approach that is more amenable to family involvement and ongoing communication—even with those relatives who were deemed inappropriate for placement.

Agencies must acknowledge the added efforts required by all parties to actively engage family members and the implications of including family members in all decisions and agency-run meetings so they can have a voice in the case planning process.

- *Balancing legal and emotional permanency.* The goal of family finding is to facilitate, through finding and engaging relatives, legal and emotional permanency for children in foster care. By enlarging and strengthening the network of family members and involving them in decisions about the child, family finding directly affects and may confound the decisions caseworkers make about legal permanency. Acknowledging family members' value and the importance of their connection to the case planning process and applying this in day-to-day practice appears to be an ongoing and difficult task for child welfare agencies implementing family finding programs. It may require agencies to reexamine how they balance the achievement of emotional versus legal permanency and how the outcomes should be prioritized.
- *Goals of the program.* One of the primary goals of family finding is to achieve legal permanency for the child. Yet legal permanency can be hampered by a number of reasons. Agency administrators will need to acknowledge that the ongoing involvement of family members, without legal permanency, can be invaluable to a child by supporting identity development and building self confidence. As a result, the achievement of legal permanence cannot be the sole measure of a successful outcome; agencies may need to broaden the definition of success to include the increased well-being of children through ongoing contact and strengthened family bonds. Also, as agencies begin to implement family finding with children new to out-of-home care, the program's goals may need to expand to helping build and rebuild supportive family networks for birth parents in addition to the children.

Conclusions

Before successful replication and adaptation of family finding services can occur, additional examination of the program models and how they differ across sites needs to occur. In the meantime, the present analysis has identified some key differences in the implementation of family finding across the two approaches. The most notable difference in implementing family finding with different target populations is the program's overall approach. For cases that are new to out-of-home care, the focus is expanded beyond the child, and is intended to build a supportive network to strengthen reunification efforts in addition to bridging connections between children and their

family members. Future results from Child Trends' evaluation, including additional findings from the field work and findings on the impact of family finding, will provide a useful framework for agencies as they determine how best to implement these programs.

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