

# Research Brief

May 1, 2013  
Publication #2013-23



## Client Voices:

YOUTH, PARENT,  
AND RELATIVE  
PERSPECTIVES ON  
FAMILY FINDING

Elizabeth Bringewatt,  
M.S.W.

Tiffany Allen, M.S.W.

Sarah Catherine Williams,  
M.S.W.

Child Trends  
7315 Wisconsin Avenue  
Suite 1200 W  
Bethesda, MD 20814  
Phone 240-223-9200

[childtrends.org](http://childtrends.org)



### OVERVIEW

The family finding model provides child welfare practitioners intensive search and engagement techniques to identify family 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.<sup>1</sup>

This brief examines client perspectives on family finding efforts and identifies ways agencies can improve services. Child Trends' researchers conducted nine focus groups, with a total of 57 youth, 18 parents, and 10 relatives in three family finding sites. While expressing concerns with challenges faced, clients reported that overall, the family finding services they received were beneficial.

### KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

- Family can be an important source of support for youth in foster care, and family finding services can help parents mend relationships and develop support networks.
- Some parents and youth expressed distrust of family and/or hesitancy to welcome them into their lives, or had concerns that services do not focus on staying connected with family once found.
- Creating open lines of communication and building rapport are important in managing expectations and engaging clients in family finding services.
- Family finding can be a stressful, emotional process for participants; attending to clients' therapeutic needs is important for positive outcomes.
- Caseworkers should include youth in decision-making about family finding, when possible.

<sup>1</sup> 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).



## BACKGROUND

This brief presents findings from focus groups with youth, parents, and relatives in three family finding sites, examines client perspectives on family finding efforts, and identifies ways to improve services. This is the fourth brief in a series summarizing findings from Child Trends' evaluations of the family finding model. Links to the first three briefs, *Family Finding: Does Implementation Differ When Serving Different Child Welfare Populations?*, *Piecing Together the Puzzle: Tips and Techniques for Effective Discovery in Family Finding*, and *Bringing Family to the Table: Tips and Techniques for Effective Family Engagement*, can be found in the Resources section.

Client perspectives, including youth perspectives, are often lacking in child welfare research,<sup>2,3,4</sup> but gaining a better understanding of these is important in order to improve child welfare services.<sup>5,6</sup> This brief helps fill this gap by capturing the voices of participating youth, parents, and relatives.

## DATA SOURCES

Extensive field work provides a unique opportunity to examine family finding implementation and clients' experiences with and overall impressions of family finding services across locales. Child Trends' researchers conducted nine focus groups (five with youth, two with parents, and two with relatives) during annual visits to the evaluation sites in 2010 and 2011. Youth focus groups were conducted in two sites, while focus groups with parents and relatives were conducted in a third.

The youth interviewed were between 14 and 20 years old, and had received family finding services. Participating adults included the parents of children who participated in family finding services, as well as aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Parent and relative participants were not related to the youth participants we interviewed.

## PROGRAM CONTEXT

The three family finding sites used different approaches and had different target populations. Data on youth perspectives were gathered in two sites. One site used a caseworker coaching approach and targeted all children in out-of-home care. In this approach, a family finding coach provides intensive training and consultation to caseworkers who are responsible for implementing family finding activities along with their other case responsibilities.

The other site for youth perspectives used a designated family finding worker approach and targeted youth ages 17 or older and/or those with a permanency goal of Another Planned

2 Hyde, J., & Kammerer, N. (2009). Adolescents' perspectives on placement moves and congregate settings: Complex and cumulative instabilities in out-of-home care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 31, 265-273.

3 Kools, S. M. (1997). Adolescent identity development in foster care. *Family Relations*, 46(3), 263-271.

4 Rauktis, M. E., Fusco, R. A., Cahalane, H., Bennett, I. K., & Reinhart, S. M. (2011). 'Try to make it seem like we're regular kids': Youth perceptions of restrictiveness in out-of-home care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33, 1124-1233.

5 Drake, B. (1996). Consumer and worker perceptions of key child welfare competencies. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 18(3), 261-279.

6 Dumbrill, C. C. (2006). Parental experience of child protection intervention: A qualitative study. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 30, 27-37.



Permanent Living Arrangement.<sup>7</sup> The designated family finding worker approach uses specialized public child welfare agency workers trained in family finding techniques, who conduct family finding services in consultation with each child’s caseworker.

Focus groups with parents and relatives were conducted in a third site that focused on “new” cases, meaning children entering out-of-home placement for the first time, or those who are siblings of a child who has never entered placement. Referrals generally fell into two groups: infants and toddlers, and older youth. This site used a slightly different designated family finding worker approach, where services were provided by private agency workers contracted through the public child welfare agency.

### YOUTH PERSPECTIVES

Most youth recalled hearing about the family finding program through their caseworkers, even if a specialized worker was providing the family finding services. They reported being told that workers were going to try and find their family members. While many were initially excited about the possibility of finding family, others were resistant and did not see the need for these efforts. A couple of youth described having mixed emotions; while skeptical that the services would benefit them, they were still open to having family finding workers search for their relatives. A few noted that their impressions of the program improved over time as family finding workers began to find their relatives.

When asked to reflect upon their involvement in mobility mapping and family meetings, the youth reported being asked a lot of questions, and said it was a long, arduous process. Several youth noted that the mobility mapping exercise was “boring” but most described their family meetings as positive experiences. One youth recalled feeling nervous meeting a group of strangers, but then was comforted knowing everyone was there to help. A couple noted that it was nice to see relatives they had not seen in a long time. They described it as an emotional process, however, and noted that some painful memories surfaced during the family meetings.

#### ■ CONCERNS

Youth voiced several concerns with having relatives contacted through family finding, including concerns about being able to trust family members they do not know well. One youth explained it was “good” but “tough” meeting his family members: “These people love me. And I love them too... but at the same time, I don’t really know if they’re good. I don’t know if I can trust them.” Several youth expressed fears that their family members are too dysfunctional to serve as supports and might be bad influences. One noted, “I don’t need my family. They’re screwed up.” Another explained, “I don’t like my family, they don’t like me. I’m going to keep it that way.” A couple of youth noted that their families would have contacted them if they were truly interested in being part of their lives.

Some youth were concerned that family finding services do not emphasize staying connected with relatives once they are found. They were thankful that family finding workers found their relatives, but disappointed that they were not able to visit with them. One youth explained that lack of transportation would be a barrier to seeing his family members even if found.

The youth expressed some dissatisfaction with the family finding services they received. A few were disappointed that their relatives had not been contacted or found. They also voiced concerns

<sup>7</sup> Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) is a case plan designation for children in out-of-home care for whom there is no goal for placement with a legal, permanent family.



about the timeliness of services, which some thought moved slowly, and others thought moved too quickly. Some suspected that their family members are wary of being contacted by staff from the child welfare agency, which could have contributed to the slow timeline.

Many youth described how they feel when caseworkers give them “hope” and do not follow through with their promises. Youth recalled the disappointment and frustration they experienced when family meetings were cancelled or never scheduled. One youth described being told that they were going to have a meeting that was never held: “That’s worse than not talking to my family – telling me I can and it’s not happening.” In the site where family finding activities were performed by the ongoing caseworker, youth had difficulties communicating with their caseworkers throughout the family finding process. They reported waiting months for caseworkers to get in touch with them, explaining that their phone calls went unreturned. They also expressed frustration with caseworkers for not informing them of progress.

A few youth also voiced concerns that they were not included in decisions about family finding. They suggested that youth should be included in the decision as to whether or not to begin services. One youth noted that the program should not be “forced” on youth, like she felt it was on her. She had just gotten adjusted to foster care and was not ready to connect with certain family members when family finding services began. She suggested that family finding services should be provided when youth are “ready for [them].”

Some youth thought that services would have been more beneficial when they were younger. As one explained, “For people who are younger than me, I think it’s better for them to do this family finding thing, than for somebody who’s about to turn 20 [like me]. Cause it’s like these people ain’t been here for 20 years. I don’t need them now.”

#### ■ BENEFITS

Youth also reported benefits of the program and a perceived need for family finding services. In particular, they emphasized the importance of family, especially for children in foster care, and the need to know and have relationships with family members. When asked to define “family,” many youth described family as those you can trust, feel safe with, and talk to. As one said, family members “support you no matter what, even if you don’t know them... if you don’t have a relationship, they still will be there, because you’re family.” They suggested that family includes more than blood relatives; one said, “It don’t necessarily have to be blood to be family... Family is family... Real blood don’t even matter. It all depends on where your heart is.”

Many emphasized that family members can be important supports for youth in foster care. They explained that youth feel less “alone” and “distant” in foster care when they know their family. One noted, “If you do feel alone and you [are] in foster care, it lets you know that like, even though people may tell you that there’s nobody there for you... you still got family and there’s still people there to support you.” Another described receiving a birthday card from his grandmother with cash enclosed. He noted: “It wasn’t just the cash. It was knowing that my grandma was still there.” When discussing birthday cards and phone calls, one said, “I don’t think people really realize how much that means when you don’t have that – something that small.”

A few youth described their excitement when their family members were found. Several reported that they had begun to build relationships with them. Even youth who did not have positive experiences with the services still noted the importance of the family finding efforts. As one described, “It gives you an opportunity to meet different people... and have someone to fall back on.” Another noted that it is helpful to see “people actually care about you.” Overall, the youth reported that family finding services can be beneficial to youth like themselves.



## PARENT AND RELATIVE PERSPECTIVES

---

Parents and relatives reported that the family finding workers typically reached out to them through an introductory phone call and followed up with an in-person meeting to explain the purpose of the services. Since many of the children referred to family finding in this site were young (age 5 and younger), the goal of the services was often to build a support network around the child's parents to assist with efforts to reunify the child with the parents. Family finding workers would begin by asking parents and relatives for names to complete a family tree. The participants also reported being asked about non-relatives who were supportive persons in the parents' lives. Some participants reported being told that the purpose of the program was to develop an emotional support network for the child and parents, and to find family members to serve as back-up placements in case the children could not return home. Others reported that they were told the sole purpose of the program was to develop a family tree.

Parents noted that the timing of the services made them defensive and wary of providing information to family finding workers. Many parents noted it was their first experience with the foster care system, and they were protective of family information. Parents also reported being confused at the time they were approached by the family finding workers and overwhelmed at the number of professionals they had to communicate with. A key principle of the family finding model is to maintain the urgency of the case and to ensure that the child is not left to linger unnecessarily in foster care. Some parents reported that this sense of urgency made them feel rushed through the process. Parents reported initially feeling unprepared to welcome family members in their lives, especially at such a time of crisis. Some relatives also reported not being emotionally ready to become involved in the case. However, participants reported that the helpful nature of the family finding workers helped ease their hesitation.

Parents had mixed feelings about relative involvement in the process. Many parents stated that they were aware of their family members' whereabouts, but willingly chose to isolate themselves due to past negative experiences. They were generally receptive to the idea of building a support network, but were hesitant to reengage with family because they feared family would disapprove of their circumstances. Parents felt that some relatives spoke negatively about them to their children. They also feared that the child welfare agency might decide these relatives were more suitable placements for the children than the parents themselves. Still, other parents welcomed the added support that relatives could bring and acknowledged that they needed help.

After the introduction to the program, parents noted that the family finding workers were persistent at keeping in touch, maintaining weekly contact to keep them engaged for the duration of the family finding case. Relatives noted that the family finding workers kept in contact "frequently." Family finding workers often stepped in and addressed families' needs. For instance, parents reported that family finding workers bought car seats, provided transportation to appointments, arranged visitation for the families, and provided referrals and follow-up for needed services for the parents and relatives. The family finding workers also acted as mediators between the caseworkers and parents when communication broke down.

Parents and relatives noted that it was the welcoming, encouraging, enthusiastic, and nonjudgmental attitudes of the family finding workers that helped them overcome their hesitancy to participate in the program. Parents also reported that the family finding workers were very thorough and persistent, promptly providing information and following up. Relatives felt that the family finding workers were accommodating and willing to provide additional services when needed. Participants appreciated the agency's desire to unify families. One relative stated, "You





have something very unique in family finding. This is authentic, something ... natural, because you didn't come to divide, you come to construct. You bring families together." Parents and relatives felt that family finding workers were genuinely interested in children's well-being. One parent noted that her family finding worker was "culturally competent." A parent advocate was on staff at the family finding agency to assist with certain cases to help the family finding workers relate better to the parents. Parents mentioned their appreciation of being able to talk freely to her, as she shared a similar experience of having her children removed by the child welfare agency. Family finding workers were supportive in helping parents work through issues of abandonment and isolation from their own families. Parents and relatives often noted that the family finding workers' "energy" was inspiring. One parent said, "She came to me and she was such a loving person... she would always come to me and tell me everything was okay... she was an angel to me."

■ CHALLENGES

Parents and relatives reported a number of concerns. Parents were at times frustrated when family finding workers were unable to find relatives. Discovery of other relatives was increasingly difficult if relatives had changed names or if key information such as full names, last known addresses, or social security numbers was unknown. It was also difficult to identify family members who had been adopted or to find family members who were overseas. Discovery of relatives was also hindered when parents did not want certain family members contacted.

In their early stages of participation, some parents felt that family finding workers were not up front about the program's purpose. Though workers may have explained the need for a family tree, some parents did not realize that relatives were being contacted as potential placements in case reunification failed. This was of particular concern during earlier years of implementation, as the family finding workers became more skilled at explaining the purpose of the program over time.

Parents also mentioned ongoing conflict with family members and their fear of inviting relatives who were hurtful in the past, as well as new people who they knew little about, into their lives. Similarly, some relatives discussed strained relationships with the parents, and reported that parents were resistant to their becoming foster parents to the children because they feared losing control of them. Other relatives did not feel emotionally ready to care for the children and wanted to slow down the process.

Relatives reported additional barriers that, while not directly associated with the family finding program, affected their continued involvement with the parents and children. Some relatives were frustrated by their inability to be placement resources for the children because they could not pass background checks due to previous history with child protective services and/or criminal backgrounds. Relatives also thought it would be helpful to begin looking for relatives much earlier in the process. They noted that it would be helpful for family finding to begin before the child entered care so there would be alternatives to foster care. Some relatives, particularly those with more troubled backgrounds, felt powerless in their efforts to have ongoing relationships with the children in foster care. Some needed services that were outside of the scope of the family finding program, and had difficulty accessing these services. For instance, some relatives wanted visitation or were interested in custody of the children, but faced roadblocks through the courts or the child welfare agency. There was also confusion concerning the law and their rights as relatives.

■ BENEFITS

Despite concerns about participating, parents and relatives perceived benefits. They reported that services were an impetus to mend broken relationships, as the family finding workers facilitated conversation between the parents and other relatives. Some parents were able to connect with family they had not seen for years, or had never met. One relative was able to reconnect with her



son, whom she had not seen in over a decade. The parents reported feeling reassured when they realized their family members were willing to connect with them. Another parent appreciated the family finding worker's facilitating her contact with relatives, stating, "Being in touch with family that you have never spoken to before can be really strange. Just having [the family finding worker] as a buffer or a go-between was really good at the beginning, as a first step."

Family finding workers were also able to develop family trees so that parents had names and contact information for extended family. Parents also appreciated being able to develop support networks of non-relatives and fictive kin, such as foster parents, friends, neighbors, and professionals involved in parents' and children's lives. If nothing else, parents and relatives appreciated being able to talk freely with a neutral person. One relative stated, "Just being able to sit down and talk without arguing, and explaining to them what I was going through, because it was a lot to take on a three year old and say what I felt and not feel that the baby's going to be snatched away because of what I was saying. I was able to express myself freely."

### IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Overall, clients reported that the family finding services they received were beneficial. Agencies implementing or planning to implement family finding services should consider:

- **Communication and management of expectations.** Participants agreed that communication is important in managing expectations about the potential outcomes of the family finding process. Family finding workers need to be careful to be clear about program intentions at the onset of the process, and not to make promises that they cannot keep. It is also imperative to maintain frequent contact with youth, especially older youth, about the status of family finding efforts, as appropriate. This includes returning phone calls and giving updates, even when there is no progress to report.
- **Building rapport.** In working with parents and relatives, building rapport requires family finding workers to maintain a neutral stance and remain nonjudgmental in their interactions with these clients. Having a specialized family finding worker apart from the child welfare agency caseworker might help maintain this neutrality. Expressing a genuine interest in each family's story helps develop a relationship of trust, and allows the worker to look beyond written reports. Providing supportive services to parents and relatives can also help in building rapport. The use of age-appropriate activities can assist in securing older youths' buy-in and cooperation with services.
- **Youth involvement in decision-making.** Emphasizing that they want their voices to be heard, a few youth suggested that youth be given input into whether they receive family finding services. While ultimately, in the sites we surveyed, the caseworker decides whether children receive services, it is important that caseworkers take youth perspectives into consideration. By including youth in the discussion, caseworkers may be able to convince youth of the potential benefits of family finding services and better engage them in services.
- **Therapeutic needs.** Family finding can be a stressful process, and family finding workers may encounter a range of emotions from the youth and their families that surface as a result of family finding. Parents are often in crisis mode and are not prepared to welcome their family's involvement in the case. Relatives are not always emotionally ready to be involved either, and they must work with the parents to resolve past family issues. For youth, painful memories are sometimes brought to the surface, and if not dealt with properly, can lead to heightened feelings of abandonment and isolation. Youth also need help dealing with their frustration and disappointment if the desired outcomes are not achieved. The process may require the assistance of a therapist or counselor to help youth, relatives, and parents deal with these sensitive issues.



## 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 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 to 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 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.<sup>1,2</sup>

- 1 Campbell, Kevin (2010). Basic Family Finding Practice Scaffold. National Institute for Permanent Family Connectedness, Seneca Center. Resource Documents.
- 2 Campbell, Kevin (2005). Six Steps for Family Finding. Center for Family Finding and Youth Connectedness. Resource Documents.

## RESOURCES

### FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

<http://www.childwelfare.gov/famcentered/casework/engagement.cfm>  
[http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_fam\\_engagement/f\\_fam\\_engagement.pdf](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_fam_engagement/f_fam_engagement.pdf)  
<http://www.childfocuspartners.com/images/RelativeSearchGuide10-15.pdf>  
[http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child\\_Trends-2011\\_12\\_2011\\_RB\\_FamilytoTable.pdf](http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child_Trends-2011_12_2011_RB_FamilytoTable.pdf)  
<http://www.childwelfare.gov/famcentered/casework/paternal.cfm>

### FAMILY FINDING MODEL

<http://www.senecacenter.org/familyfinding/resources>  
<http://www.pacwcbt.pitt.edu/curriculum/207FamilyFindingSeries.htm>  
<http://www.nrcpfc.org/downloads/SixSteps.pdf>  
[http://www.ccsww.org/site/DocServer/Family\\_Search\\_and\\_Engagement\\_Guide\\_CCS-EMQ.pdf?docID=641](http://www.ccsww.org/site/DocServer/Family_Search_and_Engagement_Guide_CCS-EMQ.pdf?docID=641)  
[http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child\\_Trends-2011\\_10\\_17\\_RB\\_FamilyFinding.pdf](http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child_Trends-2011_10_17_RB_FamilyFinding.pdf)  
[http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child\\_Trends-2011\\_12\\_01\\_RB\\_FamilyFindingTips.pdf](http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child_Trends-2011_12_01_RB_FamilyFindingTips.pdf)

© Child Trends 2013. May be reprinted with citation.

The authors gratefully acknowledge Karin Malm and Kerry DeVooght at Child Trends for their review and edits. In addition, we would like to thank the following external reviewers: Jackie Smollar, Gila Shusterman, and Berenice Rushovich. Finally, we would like to thank the youth, parents, and relatives in our evaluation sites for participating in the focus groups and sharing their experiences with us. Their insights were invaluable to the development of this brief. This brief could not have been developed without the generous support of the Stuart Foundation and the United States Children's Bureau.

Child Trends is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research center that studies children at all stages of development. Our mission is to improve outcomes for children by providing research, data, and analysis to the people and institutions whose decisions and actions affect children. For additional information, including publications available to download, visit our website at [www.childtrends.org](http://www.childtrends.org).