



National Institute for Permanent
Family Connectedness

What is Family Finding?

March 2015

Often as we traverse the country to assist sites to learn, implement, integrate and hopefully sustain Family Finding into their practice models, we encounter vast differences in the interpretation of the terms “Family Finding”, “Family Finding and Engagement” and “Family Search and Engagement”. These interpretations can range from the sole activity of constructing an internet search to the full deployment and implementation of a 6 to 8 step model that identifies tools, activities and targets to utilize and achieve in order to involve “family” members in the key decisions about the lives of their kin (“family” being inclusive of birth/adoptive family, and chosen family). The interpretations can also be limited to the application of these models to a select number of children who have languished in the system and are not on a path to permanency, or to address every initial encounter with the child welfare system as an opportunity to bring as many “family” members to the table to address safety concerns and potentially avoid entry into the system, while building a safety network.

From our perspective, we would like to clarify the purpose and intentions of the models of Family Finding, Family Search and Engagement, and Family Finding and Engagement, and as such, what is meant when those terms are utilized.

We look for the following to be present:

- That a primary focus of every encounter with the child welfare system is geared towards identifying and immediately convening as many family as possible to avert, or at least minimize, the disruption and disconnection of the children from those they love, trust and rely on, and to develop a safety plan with proper oversights to prevent future harm.
- For matters that cannot be immediately remedied at the first encounter, that a variety of discovery tools are utilized in coordination with an identified team of involved informal and formal connections (parents, relatives, connections, CASA, case managers, therapists etc) who are relentlessly and respectfully curious to determine who is related or connected to the young person on the planet.
- That as the team relentlessly conducts “Discovery”, that key “family” are genuinely engaged and invited to participate in a variety of ways to support their kin in this time of crisis; and that once invited, they are welcomed and encouraged to actually participate in such a manner to promote the well-being and safety of the young person.

- That a group of caring adults (referred to here as an enduring natural support network) is formed to participate in the planning and decision making as the day to day experience of their kin, as well as to their sustained safe exit from the foster care system. That this exit be based on the establishment of an enduring relationship with at least one adult who will act in the role of a parent that both the young person and adult are committed to, and that this enduring support network will follow.
- That once a plan to attain legal permanence has been achieved, the enduring natural support network will develop, monitor and participate in a plan to ensure that the young person is safe and well, and will include at least two back-up plans that the group has identified, just in case...

The list above are broad brush strokes of the approaches; in finer details we look to ensure that young people and families are supported by permanency competent workforce (inclusive of those who care for children or provide therapeutic services) that assists children and families to clarify and integrate their losses and traumatic history in order to attain a readiness to successfully engage in the reciprocal relationships that produce permanency. We also strive to create support networks that affirm the young person's identity, sexual orientation and gender expression to promote the young person's ability to safely clarify the same for his/herself. We support the development of supervision and coaching within an environment that promotes the practice and constantly attends to the individual and systemic barriers that interfere with this approach.

Ultimately, the goal of the Family Finding approaches is to create a robust asset base of support for every young person and family touched by the child welfare system, and that the asset base is respectfully engaged, welcomed and encouraged to participate in the support of the young person while developing and determining the plans for their future. This can be achieved for every child in danger of or entering the system, as well as for children languishing in the system.

Therefore, when one asks the question of whether "Family Finding" has been done, from the viewpoint of those who have developed, taught/trained and led implementation of the approaches in sites across the United States and internationally, the answer is yes **only** when the above steps have been completed. If only the first step, or a portion of the first step has been completed, from our perspective, then Discovery is being accomplished, but "Family Finding" has not. Furthermore, if a site says we already do "Family Finding" here, but have children languishing in care that do not have an activated asset base of support who keeps them connected and is relentlessly determined to attain permanence no matter what, then there is still (perhaps much) work to do. If children enter care without consistently embracing and involving relatives and connections who can support them and are brought to the table on the behalf of their kin, then there is still (perhaps much) work to do. If Dependency and Delinquency Courts (as well as the legal advocates) do not oversee and ensure this practice happen for every child served, there is much work to do.

Finally, from both NIPFC's perspective as well as from a review of the research conducted by Child Trends "Family Finding Evaluations: A Summary of Recent Findings" http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/2015-01Family_Finding_Eval_Summary.pdf, conducting Discovery and Engagement steps or phases of the work without continuing that work with a well performing family centered practice model that consistently maximizes family participation, legal permanency will not improve significantly. We stridently believe full model needs to be implemented in order to attain the desired results for children and families. While we are confident that the integration and implementation of these Family Finding approaches within a robust family centered practice model can assist and help improve the lives of every family, we continue to strive to learn how better to install, implement and administer Family Finding in public and private child welfare setting to meet the increasing federal mandates established to meet the needs of our vulnerable children and families.