

## BRINGING FAMILY TO THE TABLE: TIPS AND TECHNIQUES FOR EFFECTIVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

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### INTRODUCTION

*The purpose of the family finding model is to provide child welfare practitioners with intensive relative search and engagement techniques to identify family and other close adults for children in foster care, and to involve them in developing and carrying out a plan for the emotional and legal permanency of a child. Child Trends researchers are currently evaluating family finding programs in multiple localities in five states. During annual site visits to each program site, family finding workers have reported on the implementation of each component of the family finding model, including barriers and facilitators to practice. This brief will present findings from the site visits focusing specifically on the engagement process, the second component of the model (see sidebar for more information the family finding model). The brief describes current practice in the sites and identifies promising techniques, common challenges, and potential solutions to engaging family members and/or other important people in the child's life.<sup>1</sup> This is the third brief in a series summarizing findings from Child Trends' evaluations of the family finding model. The first two briefs, Family Finding: Does Implementation Differ When Serving Different Child Welfare Populations? and Piecing Together the Puzzle: Tips and Techniques for Effective Discovery in Family Finding, can be found in the **Resources** section.*

*A key component of the family finding model, engagement is often identified as one of the most difficult to implement. The goal of this component is to engage as many connections as possible, to enlist their support in providing helpful information about the child and family, and to prepare the family to begin supporting the child through committed relationships. In sites where family finding is performed with children new to out-of-home care and reunification is the child's goal, engagement is expanded to include engaging individuals who can support the parent(s) as well (Malm & Allen, 2011).*

### 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'

#### Child Welfare Information Gateway defines the key elements of family engagement as:

- Listening to each family member
- Demonstrating respect and empathy for family members
- Developing an understanding of the family's past experiences, current situation, concerns, and strengths
- Establishing the purpose of involvement with the family
- Being aware of one's own biases and prejudices
- Validating the participatory role of the family
- Being consistent, reliable, and honest (www.childwelfare.gov)

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the brief we will use the terms "family member" and "connection" interchangeably, referring to family members, friends, neighbors, mentors, school teachers, coaches, teammates, religious leaders, youth group leaders, and other community supports.

thoughts on how best to utilize 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. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with both the specialized family finding workers and ongoing caseworkers. Child Trends also conducted focus groups with birth parents, relatives, and youth who received the services. Qualitative information was obtained through 116 interviews and 87 focus groups during annual visits to the evaluation sites in years 2009-2011

## **PROGRAM CONTEXT**

The 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 most 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. For other sites, the family finding activities are conducted by the child's case-carrying worker, in consultation with other trained staff. For this brief, any references to the "family finding worker" include those case-carrying workers that may be conducting these activities.

## **ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES**

Family finding workers reported that engagement often happens simultaneously with discovery, because as they engage more family members, these family members become a source for identifying additional connections. Engagement is thus critical to the family finding process, as its successful implementation can not only open doors to discovering other connections, but lays the foundation for connections to have long-term, genuine involvement in the child's life. Without successful engagement, family finding workers and caseworkers may have difficulty adequately assessing the family members' level of commitment to the child, leading to misunderstandings or disappointments during the planning and decision-making phases.

## **INITIAL CONTACTS**

Once connections have been identified, engagement allows family finding workers to confirm that the family members are in fact related to the child, and to do a preliminary assessment of relatives who have an interest in being a life-long connection for the child. During initial contacts with potential connections, family finding workers attempt to determine the current or past relationship between the connection and the child, explore the connection's interest in attending a meeting to discuss the needs of the child, and inquire as to whether the connections have, and would be willing to share, contact information for other relatives or individuals with a past relationship with the child.

### **Tips for Initial Contact with Family Members**

#### **For any Initial Contact**

- Remember to clearly explain your role as a family finding worker. Do not mention becoming a placement option right away.
- Attempt to gather more information about other relatives.
- Remain non-judgmental and genuine in your approach to families.

#### **For Face-to-Face Meetings**

- Send a thank you note to the family member for taking the time to talk to you.
- Follow-up with the family member on the phone within a week of the face-to-face meeting.

Family finding workers often have their own preferred method of first contact with the family members. The most common methods reported were telephone or mail. Some workers also mentioned driving to family member's homes in an effort to meet them face to face. Workers reported trying a variety of techniques before identifying one that works best for the families they attempt to engage. See the sidebar for tips from family finding workers on initial contact with family.

To keep track of and document each contact attempt, some workers create standardized forms that include the name of the person contacted, as well as the date, time and form of contact. Others keep an informal log of contact attempts in a notebook. These documents are often passed on to the child's caseworker at the close of family finding services. Family finding workers in some sites go so far as to enter information collected through family finding into the agency's State Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS).

### Helpful Qualities of Family Finding Workers

- Culturally competent
- Easygoing and nice
- Persistent
- Neutral
- Sounding board
- Thorough
- Dedicated
- Not overbearing
- Supportive

## INITIAL DISCUSSIONS

When first approaching connections, family finding workers introduce themselves, and explain that the child is in out-of-home care and that they are working with the child welfare agency to contact the child's family members or other connections that can be a support to the child. The workers emphasize their role as a neutral party, first and foremost looking for emotional supports for the child. They do not raise the issue of placement during initial discussions. They stress the importance of family involvement in the lives of children in foster care and convey the sense of urgency in the child's situation. Family finding workers err on the side of caution when determining what to disclose about the child's situation, but assure the family members that the child is safe. See side bar for qualities of family finding workers seen as helpful by birth parents and relatives who received the services.

Family finding workers reported they feel it is important for family members and other connections to understand that the primary purpose of family finding is not to find placement options for the child, but rather to build a life-long supportive network for the child. While placement options are welcomed outcomes of the family finding process, workers overwhelmingly feel they are not the primary objective. Family finding workers also reported that using the word "placement" too early in the engagement process scares some connections.

## ENGAGING BIRTH PARENTS

When family finding targets children new to out-of-home care, workers usually involve the child's parents in the search for connections. Family finding workers reported that parents can initially be confused about the difference between family finding workers and child welfare caseworkers. To help clarify each role, family finding workers reported needing to be clear about the intentions of family finding; that is, to identify supports for the child and parent.

Many parents have mixed emotions about having their family members involved in their as well as their child's life, so family finding workers reported that it is important to make sure that the parents' opinions are heard and respected. In an effort to build rapport, family finding workers find it helpful to let parents vent their frustrations about their situation, even when doing so can delay the engagement process. Rush-

ing the process can cause parents to pull away or disrupt already fragile family dynamics. Some sites have parent liaisons or advocates that can assist family finding workers in engaging parents. Liaisons have generally had past involvement with child welfare and can relate to the parents and play a mentor role in the process.

Some family finding workers reported that in particular, fathers can be distrustful of the child welfare agency, and thus reluctant to engage. Many fathers feel like the agency focuses more on the mother, and that they as fathers feel left out. Family finding workers must work hard to help break down the stereotype that the agency is only interested in dealing with the mother, and show the father how they can be involved with the child.

### Tips from Family Finding Workers on Working with Caseworkers

- Listen to and respect the caseworkers thoughts and opinions
- Keep the caseworker updated on the progress of the case through monthly reports
- Present yourself as a support to the child's team, and highlight the ways in which you can help the caseworker

## INVOLVING CASEWORKERS

Engagement is primarily the family finder's responsibility, but collaboration with the child's ongoing caseworker is essential and frequent. Family finding staff also mentioned that the caseworker's engagement in family finding is key to the success of the case. Most family finding workers regularly update the child's caseworker on their family engagement progress. Caseworkers provide important insight on which family members to contact first, based on previous involvement with some family members. Family finding workers consult with the caseworker to "screen" connections before reaching out to them. Collaboration between the family finding worker and child's caseworker throughout the engagement process also helps ensure an easier transition back to the caseworker for ongoing communication with the family once the family finding worker's case is closed.

## COMMON PRACTICE CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Reaching out to family members can be a difficult process. Family finding workers presented a number of challenges to the engagement process and offered solutions to overcome these challenges.

**Resistance to family finding.** The most common challenge faced by family finding workers is the reluctance of family members to becoming involved. This resistance is most commonly attributed to family dynamics or a mistrust of the child welfare system. There are often long-standing family feuds or ill feelings towards the child welfare agency, which can be brought to the surface during the family finding process. In addition to remaining objective on family issues, family finding workers find it helpful to express empathy with the relatives over the situation, remain non-judgmental, and listen to what the families have to say, but always bring the focus back to the child. Another more focused solution reported by many family finding workers is to involve family leaders as they can often build rapport and trust, and are likely to bring other family members "to the table."

**Drop-outs.** In addition to family members being resistant to engage, workers also expressed frustration with family members who "start off strong," and then back away or "drop out." Face-to-face interactions along with making immediate and frequent follow-up contact have helped family finding workers keep relatives engaged in the process. Family finding workers reported that some family members and other

connections feel that the only way to help or support the child is to become a placement resource, and are unaware or do not understand the other ways in which they can help support the child. To help keep family members who cannot be a placement resource involved in the family finding process, workers provide examples of how they can support the child, such as sending birthday cards, visiting and calling on holidays, or even sending the child photographs of other relatives.

**Family emotions.** When family finding workers are able to engage family members they often find it difficult to deal with the intense feelings that relatives express during the initial encounters. It is not uncommon for relatives to be upset with the child welfare agency or the child's parents about the child being in out-of-home care, and family finding workers find themselves assisting relatives in working through initial feelings of anger, guilt, and sadness. While family finding workers reported it is important to give the engaged relatives and other connections the opportunity to vent such frustrations and emotions, the focus of the conversation should always come back to the needs of the child.

“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. So I felt heard.”  
– Relative

**Sufficient time to engage family.** Engaging large numbers of relatives discovered through family finding is a time-consuming process. Many caseworkers reported difficulty finding time to engage all of the relatives and other connections given their other case-carrying responsibilities. Having a position dedicated solely to family finding was reported by many caseworkers as advantageous, because the specialized family finding worker has more time to commit to the engagement process. To help maximize time and resources, family finding workers report focusing efforts on family connections who express an interest in engaging early on in the process. This was reported to be a more efficient use of time than focusing energies evenly across all connections. Family finding workers also reported broadening the scope of engagement by involving the child's guardian ad litem or CASA volunteer to help engage a wider circle of connections.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

It seems clear from our field work that engaging relatives and other family connections is far more difficult than merely discovering that these relatives and other connections exist. The engagement process is central to family finding, and without successful engagement there can be no lifelong supports and connections for the child in out-of-home care. In addition, the child's caseworker must be actively involved in the process to ensure that ongoing family engagement occurs once the family finding worker's role ends. The family finding worker must also work hard to engage both the maternal and paternal sides of the child's family. The family finding workers we spoke with are dedicated professionals, but they report learning a lot about engagement through 'trial and error.' What works with one relative may not work with another; likewise, what works in one community may not work in another. However, as mentioned earlier, there were commonalities reported such as the importance of not pushing family members about placement, and of remaining non-judgmental during interactions with the family. Many of the staff we spoke with mentioned the need for a centralized "discussion group" for family finding staff to facilitate the dissemination of successful techniques and training and technical assistance. In addition, ensuring family finding workers have the clinical skills necessary to successfully and thoughtfully engage family members, and to support them when difficult issues arise, was reported to be central to the success of family finding.

## 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>

### *Involving Paternal Family*

- <http://www.childwelfare.gov/famcentered/casework/paternal.cfm>

### *Discovering Family Members*

- [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)

### *Family Finding Model in General*

- <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)

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## **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 (Campbell, 2005; 2010).