Family Finding & Engagement Fact Sheet

**FFE Values**

1. **Children have a right to permanent family.**
2. **Children must be central in their own permanency planning.**
3. **A cooperative partnership between agencies, children and families is essential to developing concurrent multiple permanency options and realizing the best outcomes.**
4. **Permanency is a process, not an event.**

**What is Family Finding and Engagement?**

Family Finding and Engagement (FFE) is:

*“The practice of rigorously searching for and engaging extended family members and other supportive adults to establish an enduring support network for children”.*

Early search and engagement efforts may reveal that family members (including fathers and paternal family members) can be safe and nurturing resources for children, thus preventing out of home placement at outset or decreased length of time in placement. FFE is a structured model designed to build an enduring network of caring relationships for children. FFE encourages and supports adults in their commitment to contribute/be involved in a child’s life. FFE involves persistent and consistent outreach and engagement of people who provide enduring support and those who promote safety, permanency and well-being for children. While FFE was originally developed to address the needs of children and youth who lacked important connections and who were languishing in foster care, it is also being used, in the front end of the child welfare system:

* To build a critical network of support immediately
* To eliminate the need for children to come into care
* To reduce children’s length of stay in care
* To keep children connected to those who love them.

**How is Family Finding and Engagement Conducted?**

FFE consists of interactive and collaborative components which all require effective engagement between children and family members, natural supports, volunteer and professional staff that continue until, hopefully, permanency is achieved. FEE includes:

1. Identifying people who are important to the youth
2. Involving people who are important to youth in the family’s current support team
3. Active searching for additional family members and community members that can provide (continued) support to youth
4. Facilitating the establishment of a safety team/support network for youth
5. Providing support to the safety team/support network and the family to develop a plan that addresses the needs of the youth and their family

**Permanence**

Family permanence is one of the three primary goals for children and youth in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. The practice of FFE supports the realization of permanency by ensuring that all children have stable and nurturing, formal and informal, relationships with adults that endure over time.It is imperative that permanency planning occurs the moment a child enters the child welfare system in order to prevent children from languishing in foster care. Numerous studies have demonstrated that children who age out of the foster care system and who are without a lifelong connection to a committed adult or permanent legal family face significant challenges, hardships and adverse situations[[1]](#footnote-1). Without the financial and emotional support of a permanent family network, it is no surprise that these young people struggle to live independently. Permanency for children in foster care should not be defined by the length of placement or success of placement, but rather by the quality of caring relationships and depth of connections a child has with supportive adults with whose support **lasts a lifetime.**  A significant and essential advance toward establishing permanency includes maximizing the number of enduring connections between children and youth and their own extended family support network. Children are fully engaged in the FFE process.

**Costs and Benefits**

Although implementing FFE practices may result in some additional upfront costs, counties that have implemented FFE have found overall long-term cost savings by connecting children to permanent lifelong relationships and relying less on out-of-home placement. In addition to cost savings, there are emotional and psychological benefits for children. Studies have shown that children that stay connected to their family members attain more positive outcomes than children who age out of the system. For example, an evaluation in Orange County showed significant improvements in foster youth’s social and emotional measures as a result of becoming connected with family[[2]](#footnote-2).

**Effectiveness: Everyone Must Support FFE**

Successful implementation of FFE requires a significant change in culture and belief systems among various stakeholders. Leadership from each stakeholder perspective plays a vital role in the effective implementation and sustainability of FFE. All must support the urgency of implementing this practice in order to better meet the needs and improve the permanency outcomes of children in the child welfare system. Leadership from all stakeholders must jointly and publicly communicate expectations to perform FFE, and establish accountability and sustainability mechanisms to support the work.

**Stakeholders**

* **Judicial Officers**

Judges have the unique “power of the robe” to make an initial determination as to whether reasonable efforts to prevent removal have been made, set the expectation that Family Finding and Engagement practices will be employed, and that evidence of such efforts will be presented to the court for review. For example, the court must ensure that relatives to the 5th degree are notified when a youth comes into care (Welf. & Inst. Code §309, 628(d), Cal. Rule of Court 5.637, 5.695(e)(f)) or the court can seek evidence of implementation of visitation plans that support the FEE process.

* **Child Welfare Professionals**

Child Welfare Workers have a critical role in FFE practice including but not limited to: meaningful engagement with the child throughout the process, diligent searching for family members, assisting in forming an enduring support network for a child, and sustaining a sense of urgency for each child beginning with the first call, as mandated by law.

* **Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)**

CASAs advocate for the best interests of the child, which always include a permanent home and connection to family. CASAs can voice the perspective of the child in the process and use their unique relationship with the child and family to elicit more information about extended family members and other relationships that may be important in developing a Safety Team and a Lifetime Family Support Network. Some CASA programs in California successfully operate FFE programs in cooperation with the court and child welfare agency.

* **Caregivers**

Caregivers, including foster parents, group home and residential treatment providers, and relative caregivers, play an essential role in supporting the child and family members through the FFE process by facilitating visitation and addressing grief and loss issues. Relative caregivers can play a key role in engaging other family members in becoming an effective Safety Team/Lifetime Family Support Network member. This collaboration and inclusive forward thinking approach is invaluable in the FFE process.

* **Attorneys**
  + Parents’ attorneys can use their access to their clients to help pave the road to successful reunification by eliciting names of extended family members who may support them, the child, and the reunification process. In addition, father’s attorneys in particular can play a critical role in elevating the father’s voice in court and ensuring that paternal relatives are identified and engaged.
* Children’s attorneys can assist children in identifying family members and other supportive adults, can participate in connectedness mapping, and can support the child throughout the FFE process.
* Agency attorneys must ensure that their client (SSA) is in compliance with the law and can use FFE to assist with concurrent planning, visitation requirements, maintaining sibling contacts, and helping to ensure that children remain within their extended family if they cannot safely remain in the home.
* **Behavioral Health Practitioners**

Therapists can play an important role in helping prepare children for permanency activities and address the issues of grief and loss that might become barriers to successful permanent connections.

1. Courtney, M. & Dworsky, A. (2010). *Midwest Study of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth*. Chapin Hall, University of Chicago. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Six Steps to Find A Family: A Practice Guide to Family Search and Engagement* (2007). National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice and Permanency at Hunter College School of Social Work and the California Permanency for Youth Project. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)