CALL TO ACTION

FAMILY SEARCH: Creating a Web of Belonging

Removing children from their homes is a traumatizing experience. So is placement in out-of-home care, no matter how welcoming. The sad reality is that keeping children safe sometimes means removing children from their homes — but that doesn’t mean they need to be cut off from their network of supportive family and adults. Children need a sense of permanency, and permanency is not just a legal determination. Permanency means that children have an inherent sense of well-being, connectedness, and unconditional commitment.

Agencies can help create a sense of permanency by performing a family search for every child. The family search process identifies meaningful and supportive people and relationships. A thorough search builds a web of legal, biological, chosen families and fictive kin to support children who have been removed from their homes. Family search is a way to double down on our intention to help kids maintain a sense of family and belonging while in out-of-home care.

We know kids do better when they remain connected to families, whether legal or chosen. These relationships allow children to develop resiliency and work through the trauma they have experienced (Partners for Our Children). For the sake of the kids in out-of-home care, our systems must do better at locating and keeping children connected to the important adults in their lives.

This Call to Action was created to help child protection specialists, case managers, and group homes build capacity to actively identify and engage supportive adults for all the children in their care.

“There wasn’t anything that could have prevented me from entering foster care, but there were dozens of services and people that definitely could have made life in foster care a lot easier for my family and I … If my kinship relative had emotional support and their own social worker, that would have really helped our case, and maybe I would still be in contact with them and my extended family. Support services should automatically be given and shouldn’t have to be asked for.”

— Victoria Myers, FosterClub

FAMILY SEARCH & THE FAMILY FIRST ACT:

Qualified Residential Treatment Programs

Kids in congregate care facilities need to maintain connections to family. High-quality family engagement is best practice, and it is especially important under the Family First Prevention Services Act. Qualified Residential Treatment Programs (QRTPs) must facilitate family participation and outreach, document family involvement in treatment, and provide family-based aftercare for at least six months post-discharge. A thorough and effective family search process, starting the moment the child walks in the door, establishes those crucial relationships with family and other supportive adults right away.
UNDERSTANDING FAMILY SEARCH

Not all children in the child welfare system will return to their birth families. However, children may still see their birth families as part of their support system. Commitment to family search should never diminish the importance existing family. Instead, family search realistically appraises the type of support family members may offer. Establishing a web of supportive adults helps create meaningful but realistic ways for parents and other biological family to maintain connections with their child.

Montana policy reflects a strong belief in the importance of family ties. More than half of Montana children removed from home are placed in kinship foster placements. The state has gone even further in promoting the use of fictive kin placements. The definition of “fictive kin” in Montana policy is “a person to whom the child, child’s parents, and family ascribe a family relationship, and with whom the child has had a significant emotional tie that existed prior to the agency’s involvement with the child or family” (Child & Family Services Policy Manual 407-4, Title IV-E Guardianship Assistance Program).

Family search urges us to follow the lead of Montana federal law to expand the way we understand “family.” Family certainly means grandparents, siblings, uncles, aunts, and cousins. When we ask kids to identify the people who feel like family, they often include next-door neighbors, former stepparents, former foster parents, a friend’s parent, teachers, or school counselors. The other adults identified by children can help professional staff as they help build a support network. Eventually, some of the extended family and fictive kin found through a family search may become key players in permanency planning.

ESTABLISHING A FAMILY SEARCH CULTURE

Successful family search efforts begin with organizational commitment. Leaders must radiate an attitude of belief in the possibility of success for each child and of hope for each family.

Leadership must also take and support other important steps.

- Write family search into agency policy, and convey to staff the clear intention to help kids connect with family members, both blood and fictive kin. Promote and support a culture that believes in the possibility of helping every child find and establish permanent family ties.
- Develop an organization that believes that all families can succeed and that each family knows what will work for them.
- Broadly communicate commitment to the importance of permanency and building family connections for all children. Every meeting — internal and external — should explicitly
address how actions promote or detract from creating and maintaining permanent supportive relationships for kids.

- Maintain excitement for youth permanency over the long term. Family search is hard work.

Organizations with the highest levels of commitment have the most success with family search. Usually these organizations hire a dedicated specialist who can focus all their time on family search. Different places fund this in different ways. Organizations use grants, Medicaid-funded case management, Child Protective Services funding, and combinations of different resources to make family search happen for all the children in their care.

STARTING FAMILY SEARCH: CREATING THE CHILD’S FAMILY LIST

Connecting with family and supportive adults is an urgent matter for every child who comes through the door, regardless of complicating factors. Successful family search relies on respectful, collaborative engagement with family members — and it has to happen ASAP. Children need those relationships in place from the start of out-of-home placement.

Talk to the Experts – the Child and Family

A lot of small steps go into creating a child’s list of family and supportive adults.

- Set aside lots of time for each child. This is a time-intensive endeavor. Shortcuts do not work. The success of a family search often relates directly to the time staff spend with individual children and families.

- Develop processes to use with both families and children, to help them identify supportive adults for themselves. Existing programs offer ideas and methods for how to do this work. The processes must recognize that each child faces a different set of realities based on age, family situation, and many other factors. Throughout the process, organizations must work with children and families in a way that minimizes expectations about reunification in order to avoid creating false hopes.

- Make a chronological list of all placements to review with the child, family, and permanency team. This can spur memories, and it can be a way to let the child tell their own life story.

- Work with the child to identify 10 other adults they would like to contact while in care. Do not limit their input, even when kids identify older acquaintances or others who raise concerns. Remember you are building a web of belonging, and you may be able to find a way to help the child maintain some kind of connection with people even when in-person or regular contact is not advisable.

- Work with the child to create a family tree. This will help you understand how they define family.

Finding Supportive Adults: Case Study

Project UpLift in Colorado connected adolescent youth with supportive adults in order to reestablish connection and, in some cases, permanent relationships. Five dedicated adolescent connection workers with child welfare training and experience worked part-time to talk with the youth about important people in their lives. After eight months, 122 connections had been made for the 56 youth in the project.
• Make a list of all possible family, especially on the father’s side. Paternal family tends to be overlooked.
• Track siblings. Every child should have a chance to know sisters and brothers. These relationships can be some of the most lasting and important relationships for children. There are many examples of siblings who have been separated and don’t even know each other exists. Let’s find them.
• Ask the child and family about other important people in their lives, aside from family. Who shows them care and support? Who will they miss? Who helps their family cope with stress and celebrate the happy times?
• Maintain up-to-date contact information. Several successful agencies create face sheets when the case opens, place them prominently in permanent files, and update them regularly.

RESEARCH, RESEARCH & MORE RESEARCH
The organization also has a role to play in creating the list. The research efforts you offer can help children and families identify people beyond their inner circles to create a larger web of support.

• Talk to other adults who know the child to identify supportive adults. Check with the child before calling any of these contacts. Remember, the child’s feelings and decisions must guide the process.
• Ask current teachers about supportive adult interactions they may have noted at school, or adults the child talked about.
• Read court documents and juvenile justice files, taking note of who attends court hearings.
• Make a list of all social workers who have worked with the child, even if they no longer work at the agency. Also note teachers, therapists, residential treatment and group home staff, and anyone else the child has worked with closely. Contact as many as possible to develop a list of contacts. The child and family may also consider some of the professionals on this list to be supportive adults for the child.

Making Contact: Case Studies

30 Days to Family promotes a process with a goal of identifying 80 additional relatives. Kevin Campbell’s Family Finding provides a great tool to help navigate the complex interviewing involved with helping kid’s list names. A list of 80 names seems daunting, but Campbell contends that 150 names can be found through this process.

Family Finding is also used in North Carolina programs. According to a 2014 program review, workers were assigned specifically to family searches. They did not carry caseloads but instead worked to identify at least 40 family members or other adult supports for five to seven cases at a time. The Family Finding worker coordinated with the social worker to understand the children’s and families’ strengths and needs. (A Rigorous Evaluation of Family Finding in North Carolina, Child Trends, March 2014. The description of program implementation begins on page 31.)
INVITING CONTACTS TO BECOME “FAMILY”

Before making any contacts, communicate with the child to make sure they feel ready for this step. This is their process, and their thoughts and feelings need to be the guide. Let children know who is being contacted, and when the contact is made.

The first conversation with family and fictive kin is important. It can feel daunting. With preparation and a calm, neutral attitude, it isn’t difficult. You are offering people the chance to make a real and positive impact on a child they care about, in a way that works for all parties. While commitment to these children is a serious ask, you are not immediately discussing a permanent placement. You are building many parts and components of a web that will ultimately become the child’s support system.

In the initial conversations, it is helpful to work from a script.

- Introduce yourself and your role in the organization.
- Tell the contact the name of the child. Disclose as little as possible about the child’s situation, but assure them that the child is safe.
- Explain that the child is in out-of-home care and that you are working with your agency to contact as many family members and other supportive adults as possible.
- Emphasize that you are a neutral party. Remember to remain nonjudgmental about the family in your conversation.
- Explain the importance of family and adult involvement in emotional support for children in foster care.
- Ask questions to determine the current or past relationship between the contact and the child.
- Ask if the contact would be willing to be a part of the support network for this child. Talk about the different ways this might work: phone calls, celebrating birthdays and holidays, in-person visits, etc.
- Ask for suggestions about additional adult supports for the child.
- If the contact is at all interested, set up an in-person meeting or follow-up phone call within a week. Remember to get all the relevant contact information. Be flexible and supportive of the kind of communication that works best for each contact.

After the initial contact:

- Send a thank you note.
- Reconnect with the contact within a week, in person or by phone.
- Document all your efforts, and keep good notes from your phone conversations.
- Update the case manager and other team members on progress with the family search. As appropriate, update the child as well.

FOLLOWING UP

Once family members and fictive kin are identified, create plans for ongoing communication and for family time with the child. Relationships are built on time and shared experiences. Figure out how to provide travel funds to facilitate face-to-face contact between the child and family members. Visits may not always be appropriate or possible. Phone calls, letters, email, or video chats may substitute for visits in these cases, and sometimes they may work better for the child or family. Agencies can provide prepaid phones to support contact between children and their supportive adults.

This point can’t be emphasized enough: Children’s visits with their family and supportive adults
should NEVER depend on point systems, level systems, or other treatment protocols. Children need to connect with the people they care about even when they are behaving poorly — and maybe especially then.

**CALL TO ACTION**

Launching a comprehensive family search program is a big undertaking. This work is hard. If it were easy, we would have been doing it effectively long ago. But if we wait for the perfect situation, kids will suffer. It’s time to make the commitment to conduct a thorough family search for every child who enters out-of-home care.

**RESOURCES**

- **Family Search and Engagement**, Casey Family Program, Overview of issues related to family search, including tips and descriptions of programs.
- **Bringing Family to the Table: Tips and Techniques for Effective Family Engagement**, Child Trends, Review of strategies for engaging with families and supportive adults.
- **Family Search Models**:
  - **Model Programs for Youth Permanency** – the California Permanency for Youth Project’s comprehensive review of programs, costs, and staff time breakdowns.
  - **Family Search and Engagement** and the **FAST (Family Assessment and Stabilization Team) program**
  - **Extreme Family Finding**
  - **Diligent Recruitment**
  - **EMQ Children and Family Services**
  - **30 Days to Family**
  - **Native Families for Native Children (NF4NC)**

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**Get Started!**

The goal of family search is to create a pathway to a sense of belonging for every child in the child welfare system. **Family Finding** and **Signs of Safety** have joined together to provide tools, training, and consultation to help with the family search. Their websites include practical resources, tools, videos, and training information. Take a look, hone the tools you need, and take action!