

**Family Finding for Children and Families New to Out-of-Home Care:
A Rigorous Evaluation of Family Finding in San Francisco**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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More than 400,000 children and youth are in out-of-home care in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [U.S. DHHS], 2011). The majority of these children (64%) are placed in non-relative foster homes, group homes, institutions, and supervised independent living placements, while 26 percent are placed in relative foster homes (U.S. DHHS, 2011). Ideally, the out-of-home placement is temporary, but many children remain out of their homes for extended periods. When the removal is permanent, child welfare agencies are responsible for securing a new permanent home for these children; however, more than 25,000 young people each year age out of foster care without achieving permanency. Research and anecdotal evidence have shown that many youth who age out of foster care remain at risk well into their mid-twenties across a range of measures including housing, education, employment, health, receipt of public assistance, and involvement in the criminal justice system.

Transition to adulthood for young people has lengthened in recent decades, as many young people between age 18 and 25 remain at or return to their parents' homes or rely on parents and family members for material and emotional assistance. This safety net of family support is often unavailable or more fractured for many of the young adults who have been in the foster care system for long periods of time, many of whom have lost ties to their birth families, and have also lost the formal support of the child welfare system. The Family Finding model, developed by Kevin Campbell and his colleagues at Catholic Community Services in Tacoma, Washington, seeks to promote positive relationships and secure commitments from adults who will remain involved in a child's life after they age out of foster care.

This approach has most commonly been used to find and secure supportive family networks for older youth who have lost connections to their birth family and kin networks as a result of having spent many years in foster care. In recent years there has also been interest in implementing the model with populations of children new to out-of-home care. This broadening of the target population was done with the hope that by engaging relatives and securing legal and emotional permanency with family members earlier in the case process, the population of older youth with limited family connections would be greatly diminished over time.

Due to the relatively recent development of the Family Finding model, published evaluation findings are limited. Evaluations of the California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP) have examined the success of the program in securing permanent connections between foster youth and caring adults, and explored how these connections are located, formed, and supported. Neither of the recent reports compares outcomes for youth participating in CPYP Family Finding services with a comparison or control group.

The Family Finding model is comprised of six stages: 1) discovering at least 40 family members and important people in the child's life; 2) engaging as many family members and supportive adults willing to participate in a planning meeting; 3) planning for the successful future of the child with the participation of family members; 4) making decisions during family meetings that support legal and emotional permanency for the child; 5) evaluating the permanency plans developed; and 6) providing follow-up supports to ensure the child and family can maintain the permanency plans.

San Francisco County’s child welfare agency and private provider Seneca Family of Agencies were encouraged by anecdotal evidence and non-experimental research findings showing children reconnecting with family members and finding permanent homes with relatives. Both organizations had also experienced success in implementing Family Finding for older youth in foster care. In late 2007 Child Trends received funding from The Stuart Foundation to conduct an experimental evaluation of Family Finding in San Francisco examining how the intervention would work for children new to out-of-home care. In shifting the target population for the intervention to the “front end” of the system, San Francisco hoped to increase the frequency and timeliness of reunification and, if reunification was not possible, to place more children with relatives due to the efforts of Family Finding. The Stuart Foundation also funded Seneca to fund Family Finding specialists, separate from the child’s primary caseworkers, to provide the services.

A rigorous evaluation was designed to examine the impact of Family Finding on these “front end” cases and an accompanying process study examined outputs and linkages between the program components and other contextual factors. Random assignment of cases began in September 2008 and ended in February 2011, comprising a 25-month total intake period. During this period, children were randomly assigned from a waitlist of eligible children recently detained by the court, i.e., removed from home, either to receive Family Finding services (the treatment group) or to receive “services as usual” (the control group) prior to the beginning of treatment. The evaluation included 239 children in total; 123 in the control group, and 116 children in the treatment group.

The evaluation sought to investigate how Family Finding services impact the likelihood of achieving reunification, and of a child’s goal being changed to something other than reunification. Overall, the impact findings do not align with initial expectations. The likelihood of reunification did not differ significantly between the treatment and control group children, though a larger, but not statistically significant, percentage of the treatment group was reunified during the study period (57% compared with 47%). Children in the Family Finding group were significantly more likely to have a goal of reunification (than a goal of adoption) but they also were more likely to return to care after being reunified.

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The last finding is concerning and raises the possibility that there may be a tradeoff between increasing connections to family members and risk of a failed reunification. The presence and engagement of family members could afford caseworkers greater opportunities for relative placements, easing their decision to remove the child from their home yet again. Unfortunately, the numbers of children reentering care were too small in this study to explore this question; however, future research should do so.

The implementation study sought to examine how each of the main components of the Family Finding model was implemented. During the *discovery* phase, on average, a total of 30 family connections were discovered for each case. More connections were discovered through the case file review and engaging with the parents or family members than through internet searches or talking with the child or caseworker. On average, it took Family Finding specialists 30 days to begin *engaging* family members and on average, the specialists engaged with 5 persons per child, out of the 30 total family connections typically found. On average two family meetings were held per child during the *planning* component. During the *decision-making* component, which often was combined with the planning component, the Family Finding specialists helped the family develop a series of plans for the child and the parent, but the decision ultimately rested with the child’s caseworker who determined the next steps for the case. Eighty-five percent of the children served had plans involving family members committing to ongoing contact with the child. The implementation study also examined the service context to determine how similar Family Finding services were to the “services as usual” received by all children. Caseworkers reported providing some services similar to Family Finding components, but the services were far less intensive than Family Finding services and implemented inconsistently.

Eighty-five percent of the children served by the Family Finding specialists had plans involving family members committing to ongoing contact with the child.

Qualitative findings indicated multiple barriers to full implementation of the six-step Family Finding model and, for the most part, the children and families served, i.e., the treatment group, did not receive the full complement of Family Finding services. In particular, two components—*evaluating* permanency plans and providing *follow-up* supports—were not implemented by the Family Finding specialists in a systematic way. Further, while it was anticipated that the child’s caseworker would “pick up” where the Family Finding specialist left off through early collaboration in the Family Finding process, this did not often occur. In addition, the transfer of a case from one unit to another in the immediate weeks and months following out-of-home placement meant the Family Finding specialist needed to coordinate with different caseworkers throughout the six-month period of Family Finding. Also, while caseworkers received general training on Family Finding, they did not receive standardized training on how to implement the remaining steps in the model nor were they required or expected to do so in a consistent or measurable way. Unfortunately, we do not know the degree to which the lack of full implementation affected the findings.

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Our analyses of program outputs found that cases in which 40 or more family connections were discovered were neither more nor less likely to be associated with positive permanency outcomes, including reunification. Qualitative evidence from our site visits indicates that, while they faced

challenges in meeting the goal of 40 new connections, for the most part, Family Finding specialists were intent on discovering a large network of connections (one goal was to create a family tree) and took to heart the training they received that directed them not to stop identifying connections until they had identified at least 40. Further examination of the correlation between numbers of family members discovered and engaged and resulting permanency outcomes is needed. Given the many demands on staff and the complexity of the families served, it is important to understand whether time spent expanding the numbers of family connections could be better spent supporting healthier relationships between already discovered family members.

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While the findings did not show improved reunification outcomes for children in the treatment group relative to those in the control group, the considerable increase in the number of family members connected to the children and their parents through Family Finding must be recognized. Enhanced well being and other positive outcomes may have resulted from the increase in family connectedness but were not captured as part of the impact evaluation. We found family members were often engaged only as potential “back up” placement resources, in the event the reunification efforts failed, rather than as active participants in reunification efforts. Therefore, their engagement may not have been expected to increase the likelihood of reunification, yet would be expected to increase the likelihood of the child being placed with a relative. While it was hypothesized that engaging family members at the start of a case would enhance reunification, aligning the goals of Family Finding with the activities necessary for a child to be successfully discharged to reunification may need to be more explicit. Further examination of the context in which reunification services are delivered, what casework practices lead to successful reunifications, and how Family Finding efforts fit into this context is needed.

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The rich information gathered from this evaluation has laid the foundation for the Family Finding evidence base. This evaluation represents a huge step in beginning a conversation, based on evidence, to help further examine the conditions in which Family Finding is and is not effective. Along with other evaluations currently being implemented, this evaluation contributes to the overall knowledge base focused on improved family engagement within child welfare practices, programs, and policies.