

A Rigorous Evaluation of Family Finding in North Carolina

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Background

Each year nearly 250,000 children are removed from the custody of their parents due to abuse or neglect. Typically, children stay in foster care for a brief period of time, during which the family completes a case plan of services targeted at rehabilitation and prevention of future child maltreatment. One factor that may facilitate a successful reunification of children with their parents—or failing that, provide an alternate route to permanency—is youth's connections with extended family. However, because foster care frequently disrupts youth's social connections, practitioners may need to take extra steps to help youth to maintain connections with their extended family.

Over the past decade, federal and state legislation has encouraged, and, in some cases, required child welfare agencies to use search and engagement techniques to identify relatives. For example, the 2008 Fostering Connections federal legislation requires states to notify relatives of children placed in out-of-home care. Government and private funding also has facilitated the implementation of these techniques. These approaches—including Family Finding and family meetings, among others—have become popular due to an increasing shift toward placing children with relatives. This trend is in keeping with anecdotal evidence and non-experimental evaluations of Family Finding suggesting that children who had been in out-of-home care for several years and who had lost contact with family members were reconnecting and finding permanent homes with their relatives.

The Family Finding model, developed by Kevin Campbell and his colleagues, was inspired by the family-tracing techniques used by agencies such as the Red Cross to find and reunite family members who had been separated by war, civil disturbance, or natural disaster. (See text box.) The goal of Family Finding is to find and engage relatives and other kin of children in foster care to provide options for legal and emotional permanency. Legal permanency may include adoption and guardianship, as well as reunification. Emotional, or relational, permanency refers to establishing a life-long connection with an adult who will unconditionally support and maintain healthy contact with the child, beyond the age of 18.

Below, we briefly describe the evaluation design before presenting the findings.

Evaluation Design

Child Trends evaluated Family Finding services in nine North Carolina counties through a rigorous impact evaluation and an accompanying process study. The impact evaluation involved random assignment of eligible children to a treatment or control group. The treatment group received Family Finding services in addition to traditional child welfare services, whereas the control group received traditional child welfare services only. Eligible children were in foster care; were 10 or older at the time of referral; did not have a goal of reunification; and lacked an identified permanent placement. The accompanying process study examined program outputs, outcomes, and linkages between the project components and other contextual factors.

The Family Finding model is comprised of six steps or stages:

1. Discover at least 40 family members and important people in the child's life;
2. Engage as many family members and supportive adults willing to participate in a planning meeting;
3. Plan for the successful future of the child with the participation of family members;
4. Make decisions during family meetings that support legal and emotional permanency for the child;
5. Evaluate the permanency plans developed; and
6. Provide follow-up supports to ensure the child and family can maintain the permanency plans.

We were interested in testing hypotheses that Family Finding would affect outcomes in three areas: child welfare permanency, child well-being, and child welfare safety. However, examining impacts on the array of outcomes across these areas would result in a greater likelihood of finding one or more significant impacts by chance. To address this problem, we selected one outcome—“step-downs” in placements (defined broadly to include a move to a less restrictive placement and/or a move from a non-relative to a relative placement)—to be the focus of a “confirmatory” analysis; any impacts on additional outcomes are “exploratory” and merit further investigation. We would have preferred to assess impacts on emotional permanency, but we found that the data were insufficient to assess this outcome. We theorized, however, that increased connections to kin would enhance well-being, making step-downs possible. Stepping down to a family foster home, and in particular to a relative’s home, may provide an opportunity for the child to develop permanent emotional connections with that family.

Data for the impact study came from child welfare administrative data (for measures of child permanency and safety) and two rounds of interviews with the subset of youth who were 13 or older at the time of referral (for measures of well-being). A total of 532 children were included in our analysis of impacts on child permanency and child safety. The analytic sample for our analyses of well-being included 305 youth who completed a round 1 interview 12 months following referral to Family Finding and 281 who completed a round 2 interview 24 months following referral. Our process study data sources included annual site visits to each of the participating counties and a Web-based Family Finding database developed to document child-level information on program activities and outputs. During the annual site visits, the Child Trends research team conducted interviews, focus groups, and observations with Family Finding program staff and supervisors, as well as with social workers, supervisors, and agency administrators.

More than half of the youth in the analytical sample were male (58%). Exactly half were non-Hispanic black, and 41 percent were non-Hispanic white. Nearly eight out of 10 (79%) were older than 13 at study enrollment. On average, the youth in the sample had spent almost three-and-a-half years in foster care at the time of referral to the program, and the majority (60%) were in a non-relative foster home, although a third were in congregate-care settings. The interview sample is very similar to the full sample in terms of demographic and case history characteristics, with the obvious exception that all in the smaller sample were 13 or older at the time of study enrollment.

Impact Findings

The evaluation yielded some evidence that is consistent with practitioners’ and program developers’ expectations about how Family Finding works, but also some evidence to the contrary. For the most part, the Family Finding intervention served the intended population. In general, the study population was disconnected from their family members, though perhaps to a lesser degree than agency staff presumed. Family Finding workers did succeed in identifying and engaging relatives and kin of youth in North Carolina. However, children who received Family Finding services were no more likely than were control group children to experience a “step-down” in their placement during the study period. In addition, no impacts were found among any of the exploratory child welfare permanency and safety outcomes examined.

Children who received Family Finding were no more likely than control group children to move to a less restrictive placement or move from a non-relative to a relative placement.

We did find potential impacts on contact with relatives. Specifically, 12 months following random assignment, a larger share of the treatment than the control group had contact (though less than monthly) with at least one sibling (10% compared with 6%); monthly or more frequent contact with at least one grandparent (47% compared with 37%); and monthly or more frequent contact with at least one other relative (47% compared with 33%). Among those still in foster care at the time of the interview, a larger share of the treatment group reported being close to at least one other child in the household (64% compared with 54%). However, 24 months following random assignment, many of these differences appeared to dissipate.

We found that Family Finding had potential impacts on contact with relatives and for specific subgroups of the sample.

We also found some evidence of positive impacts for specific subgroups of the sample. For children referred prior to age 13, those in the treatment group experienced fewer placement changes than did those in the control group. In addition, the program may have improved safety outcomes and placement stability in a subgroup of counties. However, we found no other positive impacts among exploratory permanency, safety, or well-being outcomes for the full sample of youth. In particular, we found no differences in the level of social support between the treatment and control groups.

Although the program did not demonstrate the desired positive impacts, we found minimal but noteworthy indication of negative impacts on youth well-being. In qualitative interviews, social workers and therapists voiced concerns that the Family Finding process might exacerbate youth behavior problems, and one finding about exploratory outcomes was consistent with this concern. Treatment group members were more likely to have a clinical level of internalizing behavior problems (symptoms of depression) than were control group members 24 months following random assignment, a difference that did not attain statistical significance 12 months after random assignment. Because we lacked baseline data on behavior problems, we could not explore whether the experimental groups differed by chance in their levels of behavior problems at random assignment.

Implementation Findings

For youth receiving Family Finding services, family connections were discovered and engaged, and plans were developed for family members' continuing contact and support for the children. (See text boxes for contextual facilitators and challenges to implementing Family Finding.) On average, 34 newly discovered family members were found for each child served. In addition, 63 percent of children served had at least one family member commit to ongoing contact with the child.

Facilitators:

- **Designated Family Finding worker.** Having a designated staff member implement Family Finding was reported to be more effective than having the case-carrying social worker take on the work.
- **Communication.** Family Finding workers and social workers repeatedly stressed the importance of a good relationship and ongoing communication with the entire child welfare team.
- **Staff training.** Training for Family Finding workers and agency staff was reported to have increased the visibility of the program and created buy-in among social workers.

Challenges:

- **Agency culture.** During the study period, the implementation of Family Finding services marked a shift in culture towards more family involvement.
- **Difficulty securing relative placements.** Many family members who were interested in being placement options for children either did not want to go through or could not pass the foster care licensing process, or could not afford to care for a child without financial assistance.
- **Workload.** Social workers reported that their caseloads often prevent them from supporting family members' contact with the child and plans developed.

Nearly half of cases (46%) had at least 40 known connections (including baseline and newly discovered connections) at the end of the intervention. These individuals had a variety of relationships with the child, with slightly more than half (54%) being maternal family members. It took an average of just over a month (34 days from random assignment) for Family Finding workers to make a new discovery.

The Family Finding workers used the engagement phase to begin discussions about relatives' interests in serving as life-long supports or placement resources for the child. In order not to overwhelm relatives at the initial engagement stage, Family Finding workers kept initial conversations general. They refrained from focusing on any particular action, but focused instead on explaining that a related child was in foster care and needed help. Frequently, the Family Finding workers served as a listening ear to relatives who were frustrated about prior experiences with the child's parents and/or the child, as well as with the agency. On average, for each child, the Family Finding workers engaged with five people. Engagement with maternal family members was more common than was engagement with paternal family members.

During the planning and decision-making process, the Family Finding workers held meetings with family members aimed at identifying three viable plans to support the child. On average, one family meeting was held per child. An average of six family members per child were invited to any meetings held on behalf of the child, and an average of three actually attended at least one meeting.

Implications

Several factors may explain the lack of positive impacts identified in this study. One possibility could be incomplete or inconsistent implementation of the model. In fact, we found barriers to implementation of the two final components of the model—evaluating permanency plans and providing follow-up supports. Family Finding workers lessened their hands-on involvement after completing the model's discovery, engagement, and planning and decision-making components. The remaining model components fell largely to the case-carrying social worker to complete. Family Finding workers commented in interviews that these components of the model were not well articulated during training sessions, and ultimately were not understood well by either the Family Finding staff or the social workers expected to follow through on these activities. Child Trends found similar challenges to implementation in its other evaluations. Because these challenges were not unique to North Carolina, it is possible that the six-step Family Finding model at the time of the evaluation was not specific enough to allow for implementation with fidelity.

Another factor that could explain the results could be the inclusion of older youth in the intervention. At the time of study enrollment, four in ten (40%) youth in the study sample were 15 or older, and one in five (21%) was 17 or older. Most youth in North Carolina age out of foster care at 18, so many of those in our sample had a year or less in which to achieve positive child welfare outcomes.

In addition, impacts might not occur if the outcomes achieved under services-as-usual are difficult to improve upon. This situation could occur if: 1) the intervention is no more effective than the services-as-usual model; 2) services-as-usual are similar to the intervention; and/or 3) positive outcomes are common through receipt of services-as-usual. In general, across the participating counties, larger percentages of children were in less restrictive placements at the end of the study period than at the beginning. Yet despite the movement toward less restrictive settings, the

Several factors might explain the lack of positive impacts:

- Incomplete or inconsistent implementation
- A positive impact that is too small to detect given the parameters of the study
- Inclusion of older youth in the intervention such that not enough time was available for impacts to occur before the youth aged out of foster care
- Outcomes achieved under services-as-usual are difficult to improve upon
- Flawed hypotheses about how program activities and outputs affect youth outcomes within the population served

last placement setting as of the end of the study period for substantial shares of children was congregate care (20%) or living with non-relatives (50%), suggesting room for improvement in outcomes.

Lastly, the lack of positive impacts could be the result of flawed hypotheses about how program activities and outputs affect youth outcomes within the population served. Sometimes program developers or researchers are mistaken in their hypotheses about one or more causal linkages between program activities and outcomes. If program activities do not affect the outcomes of interest in the way expected—or if the outcomes sought are simply very difficult to change or to achieve—an impact may not be observed. One of the rationales for specialized relative search and engagement is the expectation that methodically identifying and engaging a wide array of extended family members will increase the chances for children and youth to live with relatives and achieve permanency. This approach contrasts with what typically occurs at public child welfare agencies, in which social workers often take a narrow view of family and assess only one or two easily identified relatives. Our non-experimental analysis yielded conflicting results about how or whether identifying and engaging a specific number of relatives affects youth outcomes.

Discussion

It is difficult to know which of the factors described above might explain the lack of impacts observed, but a careful integration and consideration of findings from the present evaluation with those from evaluations of Family Finding in other sites could shed light on this question. Below we discuss the study's implications for future research and evaluation of family engagement interventions that will inform development and replication of Family Finding intervention programs.

Specialized interventions such as Family Finding can only be successful when social workers and Family Finding workers work together toward a common goal, and when agency and court staff support the interventions' approach and goals. The involvement of the child's social worker is essential when the desired outcome involves a change in child welfare outcomes, such as the child's placement setting or a legal permanency arrangement. However, as is the case in other interventions administered by a specialized worker, the Family Finding worker faces challenges in attempting to incorporate the specialized or "non-mandated" work into the overall public agency case process. Further, the specialized worker and the child's social worker are not the only decision makers involved; a number of child welfare and judicial professionals can weigh in on the placement change decision. Although training on Family Finding and implementation of other kinship-focused initiatives may infuse the agency with a "family-friendly" culture, case-specific factors—including logistical challenges such as family members living far away—can still hamper the implementation of the full array of Family Finding components. The specialized worker may succeed in engaging family members in the case planning process, but in order to affect the youth's outcomes, the agency staff must incorporate the family's input and wishes into its recommendations.

Many localities reported that bias against family members was a challenge, identifying it as one factor that may make workers reluctant to collaborate with a family. However, workers must balance many additional factors as they engage with families. Above all else, social workers strive to ensure the safety of the children they serve. They generally agree that multiple placement moves should be avoided as much as possible, in order to refrain from adding unneeded turbulence into children's lives. The youth being served typically have experienced childhood trauma. With their motivation to protect children, social workers are rightly apprehensive about new interventions and introducing newly found family members to a child. Our qualitative findings show that in some cases, social workers' instincts to protect and be cautious were viewed by Family Finding workers as impeding moving a child into a new placement with relatives. The negative impact observed on internalizing behaviors at the 24-month follow-up may suggest that this degree of caution is merited, although the reliability of this impact is questionable. In any case, how decisions about placement moves are made in the context of Family Finding practice warrants further examination.

In addition, the multiple demands already competing for a social worker's time and attention may also be a deterrent to learning about and fully embracing new interventions. Ensuring the safety of the children on their caseload in the face of large caseloads and the pressures of court deadlines may leave workers little time to focus on anything but their primary responsibilities. However, collaboration in the context of Family Finding involves discussions and preparation for and attendance at family meetings. A significant investment in time is necessary to understand how a child may be affected by introductions to family members and how family members can support the child and the child's case plan. The important issues that Family Finding raises cannot be quickly discussed in brief hallway conversations. Social workers must be provided the time necessary for effective communication and collaboration with specialized workers.

North Carolina has no subsidized guardianship program, yet many relatives would need additional services and supports to provide a permanent home for a child. In addition, families were not adequately informed about the existence of available support, such as adoption subsidies and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) child-only payments. Family Finding training should include detailed information about available resources and how family members can apply for them. In addition, foster parent support groups, including kinship support groups, may be valuable sources of information and assistance for family members throughout the Family Finding process.

Conclusion

As has been the case in other sites in which Family Finding has been implemented, full implementation of the model in North Carolina faced challenges. These challenges suggest that more research is needed to determine whether and how fidelity to the model can be attained, and whether consistent implementation with fidelity would result in positive impacts. Although the lack of a clear positive impact may be disappointing, this study's findings are not conclusive, particularly when reviewed in isolation from findings from other Family Finding evaluations. In addition, the vast amount of descriptive information culled from the process study greatly enhances the field's ability to describe the Family Finding model adequately and to identify its current strengths and weaknesses.

In conjunction with a number of other recent experimental evaluations, the North Carolina evaluation contributes greatly to the growing evidence base of family involvement and engagement. Together, these studies provide a framework upon which an evidence-informed conversation can begin to address the questions raised by the evaluations.