



STRATEGY BRIEF

STRONG FAMILIES

What are some examples of **effective family search and engagement?**

All children deserve lifelong family connections and a permanent place to call home. Children thrive when they have caring relationships with supportive adults they can turn to in times of trouble, and with whom they can celebrate positive achievements and milestones. When children are placed in out-of-home care, they need this support even more. It is the agency's responsibility to ensure that children are able to maintain relationships with their extended family and fictive kin. If those relationships don't exist or they have been disrupted, it is also the agency's responsibility to build or rebuild them.

To **connect children in care with relatives and fictive kin, and nurture long-term relationships** in permanent families, caseworkers should implement effective search and engagement strategies before children enter care, as well as urgently and consistently following removal until they are successfully living in a permanent home. This brief discusses the core elements of effective family search and engagement and highlights a number of effective approaches.



Core components

Family search and engagement refers to a collection of strategies that help locate and engage family members and fictive kin for children who enter foster

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care.¹ These strategies aim to find relatives and other important adults who can provide permanent homes for children and youth, or caring, lifelong support networks that can provide relational permanence if relatives are unable to care for children in their homes.² In the past, family search and engagement typically targeted older youth and children who had been in extended out-of-home care, but the **strategies used to find connections can and should be used consistently and urgently with children of all ages.**

While search and engagement strategies vary between jurisdictions, they typically begin with an intensive search for relatives. This includes interviewing the youth (if age appropriate) and birth parents to identify existing connections that may provide a placement or ongoing support. If these efforts do not yield relatives, more intensive activities using search engines, government databases, social media, and emergency school contacts follow. Agencies have found it helpful to have dedicated staff conduct these searches.¹ As required by the Fostering Connections Act, any known relative is provided notice within 30 days of placement, and best practice dictates this be followed by a call or visit from agency staff.¹

In general, successful and effective family search and engagement programs:²

- **Are persistent and have a sense of urgency.** With the central focus on the loss experienced by children and youth and their right to a permanent home, staff should never give up trying to find kin and other permanent connections for youth.
- **Are youth-driven.** Youth are the center of the search and engagement process and are involved in all age-appropriate decisions.
- **Collaborate with community partners.** Building relationships and collaborating with partners within the agency and in the community is essential to making permanent connections for youth. Partners may include group home staff, family members, foster parents, school staff, court staff, and advocates, as well as internal agency placement staff.
- **Train staff in resourceful skills.** Beyond using search engines and databases to search for relatives, staff are trained to interview youth and family members to identify family strengths and

In Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, all caseworkers are trained in family finding and have access to multiple internal and external resources, such as court documentation, Department of Motor Vehicles and Department of Corrections databases, online search engines, and social media to search for connections. Kinship navigators are also available to assist with family finding. These efforts, as well as the relatives discovered and their desired level of engagement, are documented in an integrated database and are shared in a family finding report given to judges at every hearing. The agency now has more than 65 percent of children in care residing with kin.

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resources. They also must be trained in grief and loss to help youth understand that they deserve a permanent connection.

- **Provide wraparound services and support.** Successfully linking children with permanent connections often requires child welfare and mental health professionals to work together to provide financial, medical, and therapeutic support.
- **Address systemic barriers.** When implementing any new practice, existing policies, lack of resources, and resistance from within and outside the agency can present barriers. Likewise, when implementing family search and engagement, it is important to address obstacles, remove disincentives, and select key point people to enable the program to succeed.
- **Understand that change requires authority.** Supervisors are supported as they create a practice shift for their workers. Supervisors create checklists, develop expectations, and address systematic resistance through their work with caseworkers and with other stakeholders, such as judges, attorneys, and other involved agencies.

Approaches to family search and engagement

Although evidence of effectiveness regarding various family search and engagement strategies is either mixed or preliminary, the following strategies have demonstrated promise:

30 Days to Family®

The goal of [30 Days to Family®](#) is to increase the number of children placed with family at the beginning of their entry into care and to provide stability by connecting children with natural supports. It involves a careful and extensive search for a child's relatives, focusing on parents, grandparents, and siblings. These can serve as potential placement options but also as long-term relationships. The initial goal is to identify 80 additional relatives. A recent independent study

revealed that the program is successful in increasing placement with relatives when compared to those not receiving the services (65.2% vs. 44.3%). Additionally, children served by 30 Days to Family were in care 91.4 fewer days than those not served by the intervention.³

Extreme Recruitment®

[Extreme Recruitment®](#) is an intense and time-limited approach to finding a permanent placement for so-called "hard-to-place" youth (i.e., children aged 10-18; sibling groups; children with behavioral, emotional, or developmental concerns; and youth of color). This strategy aims to reconnect youth with a network of safe, appropriate adults and find them a permanent family.⁴ It entails 12 to 20 weeks of intense activities, including weekly team meetings, a dedicated focus on preparing the youth for adoption, and continued follow-up until permanency is achieved. Key to Extreme Recruitment is the use of private investigators that combine detective work with internet and court database searches in a quest to find connections. Extreme Recruitment was piloted in St. Louis, where the agency's relative contact rate went from 23% to 80% upon hiring an investigator,⁴ and its rate of finding permanent families increased from 40% to 70%.⁵

Family Finding

[Family Finding](#) aims to identify individuals who can provide long-term connections, supports, stable relationships, and permanent homes. Goals of the program include supporting youth in developing meaningful connections and sense of identity, guaranteeing a living arrangement that is safe and enduring, and preventing entry into the justice system. The essential components of Family Finding include:

- Urgency
- Expanded definition of permanency
- Effective relative search
- Family-driven process

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- Development of multiple paths
- Well-defined and tactical procedures (discovery, engagement, planning, decision-making, evaluation, and follow-up on supports)⁶

A summary of findings published in 2015 indicates that Family Finding outcomes across eight experimental evaluations are inconclusive. Outcomes from evaluations that utilized non- experimental designs, however, were generally positive: the number of potential permanent connections for youth increased considerably and progress was made toward more quickly finding placements for children.⁷

Family Search and Engagement

[Family Search and Engagement](#) (FSE) utilizes a six-step structured process to connect youth with caring permanent connections:

1. Setting the stage
2. Discovery
3. Engagement
4. Exploration and planning
5. Decision-making and evaluation
6. Sustaining the relationship(s)

FSE also aims to help adults who are involved with youth make decisions about how they can best serve as supports. The ultimate goal of FSE is permanency, which includes reunification, guardianship, or another type of permanent commitment, such as adoption.⁸ When used in multiple counties in California, FSE connected 76 percent of the participating youth with a permanent relationship.⁸ Overall, the average number of connections for youth increased from 3.2 to 7.7.⁸

To learn more, see related resources at Casey.org/family-search-engagement.

- 1 Redlich Horwitz Foundation. (2018). *Foster and kinship parent recruitment and support best practice inventory*. Retrieved from <http://www.grandfamilies.org/Portals/0/RHF%20Foster-Kin%20Inventory%202017.pdf>
- 2 Children's Defense Fund. (2010). *Promising approaches in child welfare: Helping connect children and youth in foster care to permanent family and relationships through family finding and engagement*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.childrensdefense.org/library/data/promising-approaches.pdf>
- 3 Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition. (n.d.). *30 Days to Family®: Achieving results for children, families and child welfare*. Retrieved from https://www.foster-adopt.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/2017_30DaystoFamily_Results.pdf
- 4 Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition. (n.d.). *Extreme Recruitment®*. Retrieved from <https://www.foster-adopt.org/recruitment-programs/#extreme>
- 5 Sittenfeld, C. (2011). *Foster care: Extreme edition*. Time. Retrieved from <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2040212-1,00.html>
- 6 National Institute for Permanent Family Connections. (2018). *More about Family Finding*. Retrieved from <http://www.familyfinding.org/moreaboutfamilyfinding.html>
- 7 Vandivere, S. & Malm, K. (2015). *Family Finding Evaluations: A Summary of Recent Findings*. Child Trends. Retrieved from: https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/2015-01Family_Finding_Eval_Summary.pdf
- 8 National Resource Center For Family Centered Practice & Permanency Planning. (2011). *Six steps to find a family: A practical guide to family search and engagement (FSE)*. New York, NY: Hunter College School of Social Work. Retrieved from <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/SixSteps.pdf>

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