

Family Finding Project: Results from a One-year Program Evaluation

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This article presents results from a one-year evaluation program testing the effectiveness of Family Finding Project to strengthening family connections and permanency. We implemented a quasi-experimental design to see whether Family Finding intervention could maximize and enhance family connections and permanency among youth in the foster care system. Results suggest that focused efforts on searching for and engaging family and kin can expand the social support network and lifelong connections for youth who have been placed out of the home.

Connection to family has long played an important role in facilitating permanency for children in out-of-home care (Campbell, 2010; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Frey, Cushing, Freundlich, & Brenner, 2008; Samuels, 2009; Schofield, Beek, & Ward, 2012; Semanchin Jones & LaLiberte, 2013). This is especially true for children in family foster care (Mallon & Hess, 2014). The growing recognition of the value of family as a placement resource has led to increased use of kinship care, a placement setting in which family connection is embedded (Cushing, Kerman, & Samuels, 2014; Green & Powers, 2007). Placements with relatives comprise 24% of out-of-home placements (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, 2013). The surge in the use of family visiting in current child welfare practice further highlights the value attributed to engaging foster family and kin in planning for the welfare and permanency of children and youth in care.

The Fostering Connections to Success & Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 has further expanded the movement toward enhanced family connectedness during out-of-home placement. Child welfare agencies now have to identify and engage immediate and extended family members of children in foster care. They must notify adult relatives of a child's placement within 30 days after the child has been removed from the home. They must also explain how the family might become involved in the child's care.

Now that the importance of sibling connections also has been recognized (Hegar, 2014; Landsman, Boel-Studt, & Malone, 2014), it is becoming the norm for siblings to be placed together—or, if this is not feasible, to ensure that siblings have visitation rights similar to those that parents and their children enjoy. The goal of the intensive Family Finding Project is to identify, locate, and engage family and informal supports in planning for youths' permanency.

In this article, we present the first-year results of an intensive Family Finding and Engagement Project at The Children's Village (CV), one of New York City's (NYC) largest nonprofit agencies

servicing children and families. The Redlich Horwitz Foundation funded this program from 2014 to 2016.

Family Finding Project

Family Finding is an approach that helps youth who are in care, or at risk of being placed in care, to reconnect with their families. It aims to provide a social and emotional safety net for foster youth who have neither a permanency plan nor a connection with their biological families or other supportive adults.

This intensive Family Finding Project uses search technologies, family engagement strategies, and other methods of locating and working with biological family members and relatives for a group of 40 youths at CV. After identifying these individuals, the intensive Family Finding team works toward re-establishing relationships and facilitating permanent placements with family and other previous adult connections.

Typically, intensive Family Finding has focused on children who have been out of their homes for extended periods, so have lost connections with many of their family and kin. The assumption is that the longer the youth are in out-of-home care, the more difficult it is for them to sustain their connections with family, and the greater the likelihood they will age out of foster care without a sufficient support network.

Despite the intuitive appeal of the intensive Family Finding approach, to date there is scant published research regarding its effectiveness in achieving permanent connections and family-focused placements (see also <http://www.familyfinding.org/moreaboutfamilyfinding.html>). For example, the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare (2012) acknowledges Family Finding as highly relevant to child welfare, but the organization has been unable to provide an effectiveness rating for the program because of the paucity of rigorous published research. The published literature that does exist

includes a description of this approach, along with a conceptual application of Family Finding.

The empirical literature on intensive Family Finding consists of non-peer-reviewed research briefs, and final reports from other Family Finding projects. In addition, there is a new cross-site evaluation of federally funded family-connection grants, including several Family Finding projects. After the first year of this study, we intend to build the evidence base regarding the strengths and limitations of intensive Family Finding.

Program Model and Methods

The theory of change underlying Family Finding has a number of aspects, including:

- Identifying and nurturing a natural support network for each youth in care;
- Meeting frequently with youth, to help them sustain a sense of urgency about achieving permanency;
- Providing opportunities for building relationships; and
- Providing post-placement support.

This expanded network should result in a shorter wait to achieve permanency, a greater likelihood of permanent placement with a family, and improved well-being, which is not fully explored in this study, but could be an area for future inquiry.

The Six Steps to Find a Family: Search and Engagement

In this study, the family search-and-engagement team used the “Six Steps to Find a Family” model (Louisell, 2008), which features discovery, engagement, blended perspective, decision-making, evaluation, and follow-up (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Six Steps to Find a Family

Step	Goal	Practice
Discovery	Screen and refer youth who show potential for participating in family finding project. Explore available family connections.	Family Finding team prepares youth for family search-and-engagement process, and addresses clinical and logistical considerations. Next, team and youth, together, identify family members and other adults who could be, or previously have been, youth's key supporters. Success achieved when family has been comprehensively identified.
Engagement	Engage those who know youth best, and have historic and/or inherent desire to help youth by sharing information.	Using individualized engagement strategy, enlist family members, and others important to the youth or family, to provide information that will help youth.
Blended perspective	Team meets with youth and family to explore permanency plan.	Assemble identified family members, and others who care about youth, to learn more about youth's lifelong need for support and affection.
Decision-making	Team and youth make decision about potential connections.	Team makes informed decisions about youth's future, including safety, physical and emotional well-being, and membership in permanent family.
Evaluation	Team, case worker, and caregivers meet to evaluate plan.	Evaluate decisions to make sure plans are safe, realistic, sustainable, and strong enough to meet identified needs.
Follow-up and support	Team supports youth and family in planning for, and accessing, essential formal and informal support.	Team actively helps youth and caregivers to access services. Team emphasizes natural and community supports that are most normative and enduring.

The first step for the Family Finding team was to screen and refer youth, and help them identify available and potential connections. This is mainly accomplished through a collaborative effort by the youth, the family-planning caseworker, and the NYC Administration for Children's Services caseworker. At this stage, the goal is to identify as many family members and other potential adult connections as possible.

The Family Finding team used a mobility-mapping model during the discovery phase. Mobility mapping stimulates the youth's memory to uncover clues about missing family, and encourages the youth to talk about the past (Allen, Ellis, Malm, & Williams, 2011). In addition, during both the discovery and engagement phases, CV makes extensive use of the Internet; in particular, it encourages youth to explore social media, which allow the youth to gain easier access to relatives and other connections.

At the second and third stages, a Family Finding caseworker seeks to engage families. At the fourth and fifth stages, the team (including youth and family) explores the youth's connections and a potential permanency plan. At the final stage, there is a permanency plan in place, along with a commitment from both the youth and the family to establish and maintain a long-term relationship.

Purpose and Research Hypotheses

The National Center for Child Welfare Excellence (NCCWE) evaluated Family Finding project with an exploratory descriptive design. Such designs allow evaluators to reasonably attribute changes in outcomes to program and help provide answers to the questions of who, what, when, where, and how associated with a particular research problem. Descriptive research is used to obtain information concerning the current status of the phenomena and to describe "what exists" with respect to variables or conditions in a situation.

Since all the youth in the target population were in foster care, each had an assigned caseworker, and received additional services

from Family Finding specialist. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Family Finding intervention in achieving a specified set of short-term and intermediate outcomes related to relational permanency (short-term outcome) and legal permanency (long-term outcome). Relational permanence is defined as youth having lifelong connections to caring adults, including at least one adult who will provide a permanent, parent-like connection for that youth (Louisell, 2008). Legal permanence, such as the reunification, adoption, or transfer of legal guardianship of the youth, remains a critical goal to achieve for youth in child welfare systems. However, in recent years emotional and relational permanence have been introduced as concepts that are equally important (Semanchin Jones & LaLiberte, 2013).

We tested the following hypotheses, of which the first two pertain to short-term outcomes, and the remaining pertain to intermediate outcomes:

- H1.** Youth receiving intensive Family Finding services will have a greater number of connections in comparison to the number of connections they had prior to the intervention.
- H2.** Youth receiving intensive Family Finding services will have more visiting and discharge resources than they had before.
- H3.** Youth receiving intensive Family Finding services will achieve relational permanency.
- H4.** Youth receiving intensive Family Finding services will achieve legal permanency.

Method

CV and the NYC Administration for Children's Services (ACS) collaborated to recruit a sample of 40 participants. Participation criteria restricted the sample to youth ages 10 to 21 who had been either in

foster care in the community ($n = 12$), or in a residential treatment facility (Children's Village has a significant residential program) for more than six months ($n = 26$). Two of the cases were missing data, so they were not included in the analysis.

A pretest-posttest study of the effects of Family Finding and engagement intervention on foster youth in residential treatment and foster homes in the community was conducted between April 2014 and June 2015. Prior to the initiation of the study, the Family Finding and engagement team received training in the six steps of the Family Finding model from the Hillside Family of Agencies (Louisell, 2009). Professionals utilizing the intervention are not required to participate in training, but to insure the best outcomes, it was decided to work with trainers who had developed expertise in the Family Finding model.

Data Collection

This study gathered qualitative and quantitative information on the experiences of youth who received services from the Family Finding team. We extracted data from socio-demographic questionnaires, case records, interviews with Family Finding team members, and the Youth Connections Scale that each of the participants completed upon admission and discharge. This database served as the primary source for documenting case progress and outcomes.

To extract data from case files and the Family Finding team, researchers traveled to CV's offices in Dobbs Ferry, New York. The project principal investigator and project research assistant, as well as an additional research assistant, developed a handbook of protocols to guide our data collection procedures; all team members were trained in these procedures, which were critical to complete case-file reading. Various members of the research team read case files several times during the first year of this study, shared findings with one another and agreed on the significance (or not) of such findings.

The study conformed to ethical guidelines, and the Human Research Protection Program of the City University of New York approved it. To maintain confidentiality, researchers coded information about youth numerically.

Measures

In addition to prescribing intensive searches to locate potential family supports, the Family Finding model uses frequent family-team meetings to engage family in the case-planning process. Case records and family-team meeting notes allowed members of the team to identify frequency of family-team meetings held for each child, up to the child's discharge date—or, for those who had not been discharged, to the project end date. In the present analysis, we determined the level of family engagement by the number of family members and informal supports (e.g., family friend, fictive kin, mentor) the youth had prior to the intervention and after one year of engagement in the project.

We measured relational permanency, using scale derived from a study on permanency in the state of Minnesota (Jones & LaLiberte, 2013):

- Code 1:** There was no evidence in the youth's case record of continued contact and emotional support from at least one adult.
- Code 2:** There was evidence that the youth had connections with visiting resources.
- Code 3:** There was evidence that the youth had connections with a permanency resource or was exploring that resource.
- Code 4:** The youth had a plan for legal permanency.
- Code 5:** There was evidence of legal permanency for the youth.

We recognize the inherent subjectivity of this measure, but there was sufficient detail in the case records—including case notes, permanency

plans, family-team meeting minutes, and court reports—to make this assessment. To ensure interrater reliability, the degree of agreement among raters, the team utilized the above scale as a measure of consistency. The scale enabled the team to come to agreement on a variable or to discard it. We measured visiting outcomes with a scale adapted from the work of Peg Hess (Hess, 2003):

Code 1: There was no evidence in the youth's case record of continued contact and emotional support from at least one adult.

Code 2: The youth had had connections with visiting resources in the form of phone calls and/or letters.

Code 3: There was evidence the youth had had supervised visits with a permanency resource.

Code 4: There was evidence the youth had had monthly visits.

Code 5: There was evidence the youth had had weekly visits.

We used the Youth Connections Scale (Jones & LaLiberte, 2013) to evaluate relational permanency. The scale assisted us in measuring the number of meaningful connections or relationships the youth had with supportive adults. (We recorded pre- and post-intervention continuous variables. Additionally, we measured the strength of the relationship (degree of relational permanency) between the youth and adult before and after the intervention. The scale assisted the team in categorizing strengths as: (0) *very weak*, (1) *weak*, (2) *moderate*, (3) *strong*, and (4) *very strong*.

Further, the team members measured the level of youth connection with four statements:

1. While in foster care, you have connected or reconnected with relatives or caring adults who will be lifelong supporters.
2. An adult has made a commitment to have a permanent, parent-like relationship with you.

3. You are living with an adult who has, or plans to, adopt you or become your legal guardian.
4. You feel very disconnected from any caring adults.

We recorded pre and post-intervention in binary variables: (0) agree; (1) disagree.

The demographic characteristics of youth we measured in this study included gender, age, race, and ethnicity. These data were provided to CV family finding and engagement team at the time of referral and assignment to the study.

Data Analysis

The analysis proceeded in several steps. First, we used chi-square tests and t tests to check for equivalence between the foster care youth and residential youth, and to determine whether the differences between pre- and post- intervention were statistically significant. Next, we conducted a series of multivariate regression analyses to compare for differences between foster youth and residential youth in outcomes within the group and between groups. We used logistic regression to examine categorical outcomes (e.g., type of placement) and linear regression to examine continuous outcomes (e.g., number of family members engaged).

Results

At the start of the grant period, CV provided the following baseline data for all youth in CV programs:

1. Forty-three percent of all youth at CV were connected to a discharge resource.
2. Thirty-seven percent of all youth at CV were connected to a visiting resource.
3. Twenty percent of all youth at CV were not connected to a visiting or discharge resource.

Table 2
Youth Characteristics as a Percentage of the Sample

Variable	(n = 40)	M SD
Age		16.5 (3.01)
Gender*		
Girls	15.8	
Boys	84.2	
Race/Ethnicity		
Black	50.0	
Caucasian	2.6	
Hispanic	42.1	
Multiracial	5.0	
Placement		
Residential treatment	67.6	
Community	32.4	
Permanency-planning goal		
Reunification	42.1	
Independent living	39.5	
Adoption	18.4	

* $p < .05$.

Age at the time of enrollment for the total sample (Table 2) ranged from 10 to 21, $M = 16.5$, $SD = 3.01$. Eighty-four percent of the sample were male, and 50% identified as Black. Chi-square association and t tests revealed a statistically significant difference between residential treatment and community placement, with a higher percentage of males in residential treatment (CV has only males in its residential program), $\chi^2(1) = 8.83, p = .003$.

At the initiation of the project, the following goals were set as outcomes:

1. Fifty to sixty percent of the CVFFP-identified youth would be connected with a discharge resource after the Family Finding intervention.
2. Thirty to forty percent of CVFFP-identified youth would get connected with a visiting resource after implementation.

Table 3
Number of Supportive Adult Connections

Variable	(n = 40)	M SD
Number of supportive adult connections		
Before intervention		1.3 (1.5)
After intervention		6.7 (5.2)
Number of visiting resources		1.8 (1.35)
None	7.9	
One to two resources	68.4	
Three or more	23.7	
Discharge resource (a resource to live with)		.71 (.77)
None	39.5	
One resource	55.3	
Two or more	5.2	
Legal permanency plan (adoption, guardianship, or reunification)		
No change	5.4	
Connection with visiting resources	32.4	
Connection with permanency resources	13.5	
Plan for legal permanency	37.8	
Legal permanency	10.8	
Visiting Scale		
No contact	2.8	
Phone calls and letters	2.8	
Supervised Visits	5.6	
Visiting monthly	22.2	
Visiting Weekly	66.7	

- Ten to twenty percent of the CVFFP-identified youth would not get connected with a resource.

In Table 3, we present results from multivariate analysis, examining differences in outcomes. On average, more than six times as many connections formed, following the Family Finding intervention, controlling

Table 4
Youth Connection Scale Pre-Post intervention

Variable	Pre-Intervention (n = 30)	Post-Intervention
Mother (birth, adoptive, stepmother)	9 (30.0%)	13 (38.9%)
Father (birth, adoptive, stepfather)	1 (3.3%)	4 (11.4%)
Sibling or other family	6 (20.0%)	6 (17.2%)
Current or former social worker	9 (30.0%)	2 (8.6%)
Foster Parent	5 (16.7%)	5 (16.7%)
Strength of youth connection (relational permanency)		
- Very weak	4 (13.3%)	1 (3.3%)
- Weak	1 (3.3%)	5 (16.7%)
- Moderate	9 (30.0%)	1 (3.3%)
- Strong	4 (13.3%)	6 (20.0%)
- Very Strong	2 (6.7%)	7 (23.3%)

for gender and race, $F(1, 35) = 596, p < .0005$. Ninety-two percent of the youth had at least one visiting resource, and 60.5% had at least one discharge resource.

A paired-samples t test showed statistically significant differences between the number of connections made prior to the intervention, $M = 1.3, SD = 1.5$, and after, $M = 6.7, SD = 5.2$. The intervention elicited a statistically significant increase in the number of connections, $t(37) = 6.95, p < .0005$.

Thus, we reaffirm the first hypothesis that youth who have undergone a Family Finding intervention have a greater number of connections afterwards, in comparison to the number of connections they had prior to the intervention, $F(1, 34) = .827, p = .367$.

In Table 4, with regard to legal permanency plans, more than 60% of the participants achieved some form of permanency. There was no statistically significant relationship between the number of connections,

Table 5
Level of Youth Connections as a Percentage of the Sample

	Agree (<i>n</i> = 30)	Disagree (<i>n</i> = 30)
You have connected with caring adults who will be your lifelong support.	74.1	25.9
An adult has made a commitment to having a permanent, parent-like relationship with you.	69.2	30.8
You are living with an adult who has adopted or plans to adopt you or become your legal guardian.	17.5	10.0
You feel very disconnected from any caring adults.	37.5	62.5

and legal permanency plans. Eighty-nine percent of the participants had face-to-face visits with a family member. Sixty-seven percent had weekly visits. Prior to the interventions, 30% of the participants reported a connection with a current or former social worker, while after the intervention, only 8.6% reported such a connection. Biological, adoptive, or step parents must have replaced the social workers, because the total number of connections rose from 33.3% (10) to 51.5% (17).

In Table 5, the answers to the questions about the strength of youth connections were translated into numerical codes, from 0 (very weak) to 4 (very strong). Using these codes, a paired-samples *t* test showed statistically significant differences between the strength of connections prior to the intervention, $M = 1.63$, $SD = 1.1$, and after the intervention, $M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.13$. The intervention resulted in a statistically significant growth in the perceived strength of youth

connections, $t(29) = 3.61, p = .001$. Finally, we analyzed data regarding the level of youth connections using the Youth Connection Scale. In response to these questions, 74.1% of the youth agreed they had connected with adults who will provide lifelong support. In addition, 69.2% of the youth agreed this adult had made a commitment to bestow a permanent, parent-like relationship upon them.

In regard to the statement, “You are living with an adult who has or plans to adopt you or become your legal guardian,” the majority of the youth did not answer. The Family Finding team explained that the youth did not know at the time whether they were going to be adopted. Only 37.5 % of the youth agreed that they felt disconnected from a caring adult, while the remaining 62.5% disagreed with this statement.

Discussion

We implemented a quasi-experimental study to see whether Family Finding project could maximize and enhance family connections and permanency among youth in the foster-care system. Specifically, we hypothesized that youth who received Family Finding intervention would have more visiting resources who would engage in service planning to prepare the youth for legal permanency.

The results depicted in Tables 3 to 5 suggest that focused efforts on searching for and engaging family and kin can expand the social-support network and lifelong connections for youth who have been placed out of the home.

The effectiveness of Family Finding in achieving permanency is more ambiguous. By strengthening the support network, Family Finding assured that every youth had a solid emotional connection to at least one adult, and achieved stronger relational permanency.

By the end of the year, 60.5% of participants had connected with a discharge resource, 92% of these youth had connected with a visiting resource, but 10–20% percent had not connected with a resource.

Implications for Child-Welfare Policy and Practice

According to current child-welfare policy, agencies must make concerted efforts to identify, locate, and engage family and kin in planning for permanency for youth placed in out-of-home care. This Family Finding project identified and involved a broad range of family members and natural supports in 40 youths' lives.

With ever-shrinking state budgets, public-private partnerships might be the most promising means of accomplishing the work of Family Finding. Family Finding team was successful in finding and engaging families, and in facilitating relational permanency for youth. This is consistent with the programmatic literature on Family Finding, which—while scant—identifies the key outcome as permanent family connections.

Youth who are aging out of care, without permanency, are of great concern in child welfare, given the often-grim outcomes for these young adults. Family Finding was significantly successful in facilitating permanent family placements, and reducing the likelihood of youth aging out of care, without permanent connection. This speaks to the intervention's effectiveness for certain types of permanency outcomes. In hindsight, it seems that we might have been overly idealistic to expect that strengthening family connections and involvement would necessarily result in more expeditious legal permanency for all youth in the study.

In assessing what we have learned about Family Finding, it appears that the greatest unknown is whether there is a long-term benefit in finding and engaging families (on behalf of youth) to facilitate permanency. We could not determine this in our one-year study. Whether the family relationships established and supported will endure over the long term, and provide benefits to the youth that we cannot now imagine, much less measure, in the short term, remains an unanswered question.

Study Limitations

This was a descriptive exploratory study in which we did not randomly select the participants. The limitation of this design is that it

provides comparatively weaker evidence of program effects than one that randomizes. The research team strived to achieve the most accurate data possible by reading all case notes, court reports, service plans, family-team-meeting and provider notes, and conducting extensive interviews with project staff. But if family engagement efforts were not recorded, they were not captured in this study.

One limitation stems from the size of the study sample. Participants in this study came from diverse backgrounds, from the type of placement and length of stay, to age and behavioral issues. This diversity of youth within a relatively modest sample size mandates further examination to determine whether Family Finding produces different results for specific sub-populations.

Second, the study spanned only the first year of a project funded for two years. This did not allow us to observe outcomes for all youth, but we look forward to learning more when we examine the full 50 cases in the second year.

Conclusions

This study found that enhancing intensive family search-and-engagement interventions resulted in more visiting resources for youth in out-of-home care. There was an upswing in visiting resources for youth, with potentials to progress toward permanency. In addition, there is a greater likelihood that these youths will have at least one lifelong supportive emotional connection with a consistently caring adult. Intensive Family Finding also resulted in a greater likelihood that a child would achieve permanency through placement with a relative, and a lesser likelihood of aging out of care with no permanency.

The evidence in support of Family Finding is clear. A mechanism for studying and strengthening physical-permanency resolution, this Family Finding study uncovered a need for further research on the effectiveness of Family Finding for producing specific permanency outcomes.

NCCWE's evaluation of Family Finding Project did not intend to render a thumbs up-thumbs down assessment of whether the program "worked." Rather, it is part of a broader Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) process. In any CQI process, data are used to consider and improve specific aspects of the initiative's implementation. The findings from this study will be used by the Children's Village Family Finding staff to adapt the model to improve outcomes as stated in the program goals, and will share findings and challenges with colleagues in New York City to increase knowledge for practice in the field. Improved well-being, not fully explored in this study, is also an area of inquiry which will be explored in subsequent studies.

The idea behind Family Finding Project is powerful, and powerful ideas are often difficult to bring to bear, especially when they are addressing complex social problems. The Family Finding team faced many challenges, but they are ready and willing to move this project forward.

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