



July 2024

## 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 child protective services determine children must be removed from their home into out-of-home placement, it is the agency's responsibility to ensure that they maintain relationships with their extended relatives and chosen family (fictive kin). If those relationships don't exist or they have been disrupted, child protection agencies must prioritize family search and engagement efforts that will build or rebuild them.

These strategies are supported by federal law. The [Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008](#) requires that relatives be notified within 30 days of a child's placement in out-of-home care. Identifying relatives as an initial placement option also aligns with the [Indian Child Welfare Act](#). The [First Prevention Services Act of 2018](#) allows states and tribes to use federal Title IV-E funds for upfront prevention services to support children living safely with their families, including relatives and fictive kin. In addition, a recent final rule on [specific licensing standards](#) provisional licenses to relatives and chosen family so children can be placed with family immediately and from the start.

Before and while children are in foster care, caseworkers and agency staff should [implement intensive search and engagement strategies](#) to **connect children with relatives and fictive kin, and nurture long-term relationships** to ensure permanency and a sense of belonging.

This strategy brief highlights foundational commitments that promote this approach and describes several promising tools to help jurisdictions swiftly identify relatives and fictive kin to increase the likelihood that children [remain with family](#) and within their own communities.

“Placing children with family helps to address disproportionality in the child welfare system. Children of color are overrepresented in foster care. Not only does kinship care help to reduce the number of children in care, but it also allows children, specifically children of color, to maintain their familial connections and cultural identity.”

—Melanie Scheetz, Executive Director, Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition

## Foundational commitments

Family search and engagement refers to a collection of strategies to help locate and engage relatives and chosen family for children who enter foster care.<sup>1</sup> These strategies aim to find family members and other important adults who can provide permanent homes or serve as a caring, lifelong support network for children.<sup>2</sup> In the past, family search and engagement typically targeted older youth and children who had been in extended foster care, but **efforts to find connections can and should be consistent and urgent for children of all ages**, and bolstered by a number of organizational commitments, including:

- **Cultivating a [kin-first agency culture](#).** Universal family search and engagement efforts require an organizational culture that values kinship placement and institutionalizes it as the norm, not the exception. To advance this type of cultural shift and increase kin placements, [Colorado](#) and [Texas](#) trained staff to implement practices removing kinship placement barriers and identify opportunities to enhance kinship engagement and support. Other jurisdictions [developed intentional policies governing kinship care](#) to advance [promising shifts in agency practices related to kinship](#). [New York](#) adopted a [kin-first firewall](#), which requires a higher level of review to verify that all viable options have been explored to achieve a kinship placement before a non-kinship placement is made, thereby making kin the presumptive placement option when a child is initially removed or experiences movements while in foster care. In [Philadelphia](#), the commissioner’s approval process requires checkpoints prior to finalizing placement decisions to ensure caseworkers exhaust all measures to identify and engage relatives before placing children with non-relatives or in group settings.
- **Honoring child and family cultural identities.** Cultural identity is a significant aspect of the life of every person, including children in foster care. Black and American Indian/Alaska Native children are [disproportionately represented](#) in the child welfare system relative to their proportion in the general population.<sup>3</sup> Child protection agencies must [implement culturally appropriate practices and activities](#) in support of families’ race/ethnicity, faith/religious connections, family language, food, and other traditions while children are in placement. To that end, caseworkers must employ rigorous family mapping efforts including genograms, case record mining, and children and family interviews, when appropriate, to ensure young people remain or become connected to their cultural identity and community. [California](#), [Hawaii](#), and [Pennsylvania](#) have amended their formal rights of children in foster care to support the rights of children to engage in cultural activities, whether placed with kin or non-kin, and to ensure they maintain a strong cultural identity while in custody of the child welfare system.
- **Assigning dedicated staff to identify family.** High caseloads and administrative responsibilities may make it difficult for caseworkers to effectively conduct rigorous family search and engagement. To offer support to caseworkers, [New York](#) created a [kinship champion](#) staff position to serve as kinship placement advocates and community liaisons for families involved with the child welfare system. Kinship champions identify, engage, and assess potential relative and fictive kin caregivers, offer resources to help them make informed decisions, and collaborate with community service providers.
- **Partnering with families in decision-making.** The voices of parents and children are essential to decisions related to case planning and placements. To ensure families are heard when decisions are made, [Washington](#) and other states hold family team decision making meetings to [engage](#)

[families and involve key individuals](#) (such as fictive kin, friends, foster parents) in critical decisions regarding child removals, placements, and family reunifications.

- **Removing licensing barriers.** [Licensing barriers](#) can delay immediate placement of children with kin, and the traditional foster care licensing and home study process is lengthy. Many states, including **Connecticut, Maryland, and Rhode Island**, have allowed for provisional licensing or emergency placements with kin. In **Allegheny County, Pa.**, kinship care provider [A Second Chance, Inc.](#), expedites the process by licensing kin caregivers within 60 days of placement, during which time families receive specialized kinship training and support to increase permanency.

“The child welfare system has been known for separating families, ultimately destroying the relationship between children and parents. Child welfare leaders must be courageous enough to make changes. We need to adopt a new process that prioritizes bringing families together to provide children with supportive, safe family connections.”

—Jennifer Jacobs, CEO, Connect Our Kids

## Models and tools

[A recent analysis of family finding efforts](#) offers a range of evidence-informed strategies and promising practices for establishing and sustaining effective approaches that yield positive outcomes for children in custody of the child welfare system. While family search and engagement practices vary across jurisdictions, several models have proven effective in identifying a significant number of potential permanent connections for children and quickly finding kinship placements for them.

### Family finding models

**Extreme Recruitment®** is an intense and time-limited approach to finding a permanent placement for children ages 10 to 18; sibling groups; children with behavioral, emotional, or developmental concerns; and children of color. This strategy aims to reconnect children with a network of safe, appropriate adults and find them a permanent family<sup>4</sup> through 12 to 20 weeks of intensive recruitment efforts and permanency preparation. Staff partner with private investigators who combine detective work with internet and court database searches to locate connections. Upon hiring private investigators, contacts with kin increased from 23% to 80%,<sup>5</sup> and the rate of finding permanent families increased from 40% to 70%.<sup>6</sup> Extreme Recruitment® has been implemented in [Virginia](#) and other jurisdictions since its initial launch in 2008.

**30 Days to Family®** builds on the success of Extreme Recruitment®, by deploying diligent family search and engagement efforts at the outset of children’s entry into care. The 30 Days to Family® model features two major components: **family finding and family support intervention**. Family finding involves a careful and extensive search to identify an average of 150 relatives—initially focusing on parents, grandparents, and siblings — and placing the child with kin within 30 days of the child’s placement in out-of-home care. Family support interventions include working with a specialist to ensure concrete and community resources are accessible and formal and informal support networks are established. One study found that Missouri children served by the program were more likely to be placed with family, spent 91.4 fewer days in care, 81% less likely to experience a placement change, and 28% less likely to need a treatment setting than those not served by the intervention.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, children with an identified disability remained in care an average 257.8 fewer days. Extreme Recruitment® and 30 Days to Family® are both programs of the Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition in Missouri.<sup>8</sup>

**Family Finding™**, a practice model of Pale Blue Inc., aims to identify relatives and other supportive adults who can provide children with long-term connections, supports, stable relationships, and permanent homes. The essential components of Family Finding™ include:<sup>9</sup>

1. Urgency.

2. Expanded definition of permanency.
3. Effective relative search.
4. Family-driven process.
5. Development of multiple paths.
6. Well-defined and tactical procedures (discovery, engagement, planning, decision-making, evaluation, and follow-up on supports).

Program goals include supporting children in developing meaningful connections, strengthening their sense of identity, guaranteeing a living arrangement that is safe and enduring, and preventing entry into the justice system. Research indicates that the Family Finding™ model can yield a considerable increase in the number of potential permanent connections for children new to foster care as well as those lingering in care.<sup>10</sup>

The [Family Search and Engagement](#) model consists of a similar six-step structured process to connect children 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)

The goal for implementing the series of steps is permanency, which includes reunification, guardianship, or another type of permanent commitment, such as adoption. The model has been utilized in [Nevada](#), [Florida](#), and [California](#), and has yielded positive outcomes for children in out-of-home care, including increased permanency and connections.<sup>12</sup>

### Model adaptation and integration

Many other jurisdictions have adapted family search and engagement models and integrated them into their programming. In [Texas](#), Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) [utilize a range of family search strategies and tools](#) to identify and connect with families, including connectedness maps, tree houses, genograms, internet searches, and out-of-country searches. In [Ohio](#), [Kinnect to Family](#) is a specialized, intense family search and engagement program to identify family members. Central to this approach is a program-specific genogram, which documents relatives and other relationships of a child. Through this genogram, Kinnect to Family can identify, on average, 151 connections per child.

### Testimonial: Allegheny County, Pa.

*"In Allegheny County, family finding efforts have been and continue to be prioritized. No placement referrals can be made until kinship options are thoroughly explored. To accomplish this, we employ several strategies. For example, direct services teams complete a genogram, interview family members to identify natural supports, complete diligent searches for absent parents, and invite natural supports to conferences and teaming meetings where family voice guides the created action steps. We utilize technology-based methods by employing paralegals that complete [Diligent](#) and [Accurint](#) searches and we enacted a new system, [Augintel](#), to electronically locate family support throughout the case record. We modified official court paperwork, adding a mandatory section that requires child welfare professionals to document all family finding efforts. As a result, over 60% of youth who are unable to remain at home are placed with kin due to our extensive family finding efforts. We will continually increase awareness around the need for kinship homes and create new standards to ensure youth have safe, stable placements with kin."<sup>11</sup>*

—Stacey Good, Director of Operations,  
Allegheny County Office of Children, Youth and Families

[Connecticut](#) employs various family search and engagement strategies to identify kin placements. The process begins with a [considered removal child and family team meeting](#), where staff discuss the case and determine whether out-of-home care is necessary. According to statewide kinship firewall policies, child protective service staff must exhaust all options to identify potential relative placement before a child can be placed with a non-relative caregiver. At the outset, a designated staff member meets with the family to identify potential placement options and utilizes agency search engines to identify other biological and fictive kin connections. After family connections are identified, kin licensing staff conducts an assessment

of the potential kinship caregiver, including an evaluation of physical property and background checks. Once caregivers pass the assessment, the child immediately is placed in their care.<sup>13</sup>

### Technology-based tools

Finding and engaging families is a labor-intensive process that includes consistent outreach, investigative search, and documentation. Emerging technology-based tools may help support and streamline these tasks. While formal evaluation of existing technology-based tools has been limited, many child protection agencies have incorporated an array of web-based resources to augment or advance their family search strategies. Three examples include:

- [Binti](#) is a cloud-based software designed to help child welfare professionals identify and engage potential kinship caregivers. Since its launch in 2017, Binti software has been used at over 500 agencies in 34 states and the District of Columbia, including 10 statewide implementations. Binti modules include licensing, placement, and case management.<sup>14</sup> A new family search and engagement module has been developed that allows staff to access Clear investigation software to conduct searches across multiple online databases and social media outlets to locate relatives and kin, send and document bulk outreach, and schedule periodic follow-up reminders. Caseworkers also can utilize Binti genogram software to map out family connections. With these streamlined tools, caseworkers can perform their tasks more efficiently and build up comprehensive and dynamic networks more effectively. This newest module is being piloted in five jurisdictions, with planning underway for an initial outcome evaluation.<sup>15</sup>
- [Connect Our Kids](#) created [Family Connections](#), a web-based family mapping and engagement tool to help staff to quickly build a visual family tree of possible kin placements and supports for children. The software enables users to document family strengths, find additional supportive family members, and engage more deeply with kin to build a team of support around the child and family. Users can curate contact information retrieved from integrated internet search tools, including [People Search](#). These tools are designed to enhance caseworker efficiency and productivity in family search and increase the number of kin placement options for children in custody of a child protection agency.<sup>16</sup>
- [Seneca Family of Agencies](#) offers various permanency-focused services to ensure children remain safely with a loving family, preferably their family of origin. To build supportive family networks for children in out-of-home care, staff employs intensive family finding efforts to identify potential kinship placement options using its [SenecaSearch](#) database, which provides caseworkers with a customized, comprehensive report that includes contact information for possible relatives and family acquaintances. SenecaSearch currently is being used in 100 jurisdictions either directly or in partnership through private child welfare agencies, CASAs, and [Wendy's Wonderful Kids](#) (a program of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption). Clif Venable, Seneca's search manager, said that using this web-based technology is "helpful in finding relatives who are previously unknown to the county or state, and in cases where the parents are unwilling or unable to provide names of relatives. When combined with diligent case mining, it can provide an overall picture of possible relatives for potential placement or connections for the child."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Redlich Horwitz Foundation. (2018). [Foster and kinship parent recruitment and support best practice inventory](#).

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Casey Family Programs. (2023). [Signature report: Thriving families safer children supportive communities – Investing in children and families](#).

<sup>4</sup> Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition. (n.d.). *Extreme Recruitment*®. [www.foster-adopt.org/recruitment-programs/#extreme](http://www.foster-adopt.org/recruitment-programs/#extreme)

<sup>5</sup> Scheetz, M., & Flavin, G. (Winter 2015). [CW360° Culturally Responsive Child Welfare Practice-Winter 2015](#). Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare. School of Social Work, University of Minnesota, 24-25.

<sup>6</sup> Sittenfeld, C. (2011). [Foster care: Extreme edition](#). Time.

<sup>7</sup> Atkinson, A. J. (2023). [A comparison of child welfare outcomes and cost savings achieved in diverse implementation context with 30 Days to Family® intervention](#). *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 17(2), 305-332. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2022.2026271>

<sup>8</sup> Content informed by an email exchange with Melanie Scheetz, Executive Director, Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition, on May 2, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> National Institute for Permanent Family Connectedness. (2020). [More about Family Finding](#).

<sup>10</sup> Garwood, M.M., & Williams, S.C. (2015). [Differing effects of family finding service on permanency and family connectedness for children new to versus lingering in the foster care system](#). *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 9(2), 115-133.

Leon, S. C., Saucedo, D. J., & Jachymiak, K. (2016). [Keeping it in the family: The impact of a Family Finding intervention on placement, permanency, and well-being outcomes](#). *Children and Youth Services Review*, 70, 163-170.

<sup>11</sup> Content informed by an email exchange with Stacey Good, Director of Operations, Allegheny County Children, Youth and Families, on March 14, 2024.

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> Content informed by a conversation with Natalia Liriano, Director, Connecticut Department of Children & Families, on May 1, 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Binti. (2023). [Increasing kinship care placements and support through better family finding and engagement](#)

<sup>15</sup> Content informed by a conversation with Katherine Xia, Senior Product Manager, and Tiffany Collins, Manager of Customer Success Team and Subject Matter Expert, Binti, on June 11, 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Content informed by a conversation with Jennifer Jacobs, CEO, and Megan Burke-Bonilla, Chief of Staff, Connect Our Kids, on February 1, 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Content informed by an email exchange with Clif Venable, Search Manager, Seneca Family of Agencies, on June 28, 2024.

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### Casey Family Programs

Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for children and families in the United States. By working together, we can create a nation where Communities of Hope provide the support and opportunities that children and families need to thrive. Founded in 1966, we work in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and with tribal nations across North America to influence long-lasting improvements to the well-being of children, families and the communities where they live.

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