

Family Connections Oregon: Research Capsule 4

March 2014

A Rigorous Evaluation of Family Finding in San Francisco

Malm, Allen, McKlindon, & Vandivere, Child Trends July 2013

Study Location: San Francisco, CA

Population Served: Children (and their siblings) new to foster care (no previous foster care spells; in foster care for 2 weeks or less)

Research Design: Randomized Control Trial

Family Finding

Model: Kevin Campbell 6-step model: discovery, engagement, planning, decision-making, evaluation, follow-up supports. Evaluation and follow-up supports components not implemented systematically. Average length of service = 6 months (original model was 3 months).

Process Issues:

Staffing/Training: DHS staff (investigation, court dependency, family services units) + Family Finding specialists + Seneca staff (support Family Finding specialist; monitored fidelity; attended unit meetings; supervise caseloads) were trained. Project Manager supervised day-to-day operations, supervised Seneca staff, quality assurance, period reporting, and trouble shooting.

Methods: Use relative search already done, case file review, internet search, & interviewing family members. Found most additional family contacts by interviewing mom or a maternal relative. Database searches (after receiving contacts found through routine relative search) were not as useful. Caseworker had final say on which family members would be contacted.

Number of Contacts: Goal was 40 found, 6 interacted with FF specialist. Found no relationship between number of contacts found, engaged or participated in meetings and reunification.

Barriers:

- Communicating with caseworker (making initial contact; keeping up with caseworker changes; system for reporting case progress)
- Caseworkers unclear about service (purpose; unaware of; discovery only; joint goals of emotional and legal permanency)
- Caseworker value alignment (why build family support when the child is in a stable placement; not wanting to disrupt placement; more family to engage – need to re-evaluate plans)
- Alignment with current practice (duplication in planning efforts; follow-up not part of FF service; transferring case to caseworker for follow-up)
- Family unclear about service (thought purpose was placement resources, not back-up planning)
- Legally establishing paternity
- Unaccompanied and undocumented minors

Family Connections Oregon: Research Capsule 4

March 2014

- Family reluctance
- Sensitive/therapeutic nature of services (dealing with trauma; family tensions/dynamics)
- Boundaries (FF specialist getting enmeshed with family; caseworkers not trusting FF specialist)
- Families feeling pace of FF was too rushed/urgent

Family Meeting

Model: No specific model – goal was to hold “planning meeting(s)”

Process Issues:

Staff/Training: None.

Description: Goal of meeting (avg = 2 per family) was to identify ways family could support the child and parent’s needs; pick a family team leader to represent the family with the public agency and gather the family together in the future without professional help. Caseworkers invited but typically did not come. Average of FF specialists helped to develop 3 plans (typically focused on communication, visits, & material supports), but decision ultimately rested with caseworker. Average of 3 family connections (10% of total connections) were invited to meetings (2 maternal, 1 paternal); 9% of all connections attended at least 1 meeting. TDMs were held every time there was a placement change (services as usual conducted by TDM specialist); FF specialists were not included in these meetings so attendance was sporadic but they helped prepare family.

Timing in Case: Average time to first planning meeting was 69 days (median 43 days).

Key Research Findings:

- No statistically significant difference in reunification (57% FF vs. 47% control)
- FF group significantly more likely to have a reunification goal but also more likely to return to care after reunification. Implication is that there may be a tradeoff between increasing family connections and risk of failed reunification (easier to re-place?).
- Considerable increase in number of family contacts found compared to controls – difference may be that FF continued beyond first 2 weeks of the out-of-home placement (i.e., many more connections found 2 weeks – 3 months later).
- No relationship between the number of contacts found, engaged or participated in meetings and reunification. If time is spent on finding connections, it may mean that specialists are not spending time on supporting healthy relationships between already discovered family members.
- Planning meeting may have focused on back-up placement resources rather than how to engage family members as active participants in reunification.
- Challenges aligning goals of FF with existing DHS priorities and practices. No clear link between FF service and what is necessary for reunification.