

# Family Connections Oregon: Research Capsule 9

August 2014

## A Rigorous Evaluation of Family Finding in North Carolina, March 2014

Child Trends - Malm, Vandivere, Allen, Williams & McKlindon

**Study Location:** North Carolina (9 counties)

**Population Served:** Children in foster care 10 years old or older at the time of referral, did not have a goal of reunification and lacked an identified permanent placement

**Research Design:** RCT impact study and process study. The control group received child welfare services as usual. The treatment group received Family Finding services in addition to child welfare services as usual. Evaluators utilized existing data, as well as interviews, focus group and observations.

**Sample Size:** 532 children

**Model:** 4-phase model primarily testing “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)

### **Phase 1- Discovery:**

- Family Finding specialist (non-case carrying worker) used a variety of methods to discover at least 40 family members or other adult supports for each child.
- Meeting with caseworker to understand agency’s relationship with family within 2 weeks of randomization
- Case file review
- Meeting with child (if appropriate)
- Web-based search, such as Accurint and US Search

### **Phase 2- Engagement:**

- Contact identified connections through phone or mail

### **Phase 3- Planning and Decision Making:**

- Blended Perspective Meeting (Family meeting #1): Held a few weeks after initial contact with a goal of identifying the child’s needs
- Network for Life Meeting (Family meeting #2): Plans made to facilitate achievement of emotional and legal permanency for the child, including the development of 3 viable plans

### **Phase 4- Evaluation and Follow-Up Support:**

- Unclear, rarely fully implemented

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## **Project Barriers:**

### **Agency/ Workforce barriers:**

- **Caseloads:** Social workers reported that their caseloads often prevented them from supporting family members' contact with the child and plans developed.
- **Resistance from child welfare professionals.** In some instances, therapists and social workers were cited as barriers to engagement. They sometimes disagreed about whom in the family the Family Finding worker should contact. Also, the therapists and social workers sometimes delayed the process of contacting relatives or commented that the Family Finding process was "moving too fast." Sometimes therapists wanted to approve the Family Finding worker's activities at every phase and be involved in making such decisions as whom to contact and when. Some Family Finding workers reported that social workers may have resisted exploring one side of a child's family, due to worker biases against the family, or negative family histories.
- **Agency culture:** During the study period, the implementation of Family Finding services marked a shift in culture towards more family involvement. In one county, social workers were suspicious of any private provider staff performing non-mandated services like Family Finding. In another county, the Family Finding worker did not feel supported by the administration, and felt this led to less buy in of the program and lower numbers of referrals.

### **Model Barriers:**

- **Model confusion:** Family Finding workers lessened their hands-on involvement after completing the model's discovery, engagement, and planning and decision making components. Follow-up fell to the case-carrying social worker to complete, but follow-up expectations were unclear and only intermittently followed.
- **Age of youth:** Many of the youth in the study were older than 15 and NC youth age out of foster care at 18, giving them less time to achieve positive child welfare outcomes.
- **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.
- **Reluctant families:** Some relatives were hesitant to give out contact information about other family members; in such cases, Family Finding workers asked them to pass along the Family Finding worker's contact information in case the other family members were willing to contact the Family
- **Paternity not established:** Many of the Family Finding workers commented on the difficulty locating paternal family members if the father was unknown. Case notes on fathers were not as detailed in the past, so information in the file typically only included maternal relatives. In addition, mothers were not always forthcoming about information concerning the paternal side of families, which also made discovery difficult.

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- **Older youth resistance:** Many of the Family Finding workers noted that older youth who had been in foster care for extended periods of time were more resistant to Family Finding services than were youth who had more recently entered care. Some youth were apprehensive about reconnecting with families that had been disengaged for a long period of time. Others had undergone therapy to break ties with their family, and had trouble reversing that process.
- **Searching out-of-state:** Many of the Family Finding workers cited the limitations of state-based search tools, such as state DMV records, food stamp records, and the local child abuse and neglect registry, in finding out-of-state relatives. This was particularly challenging in those localities that had more transient populations.

## **Key Research Findings:**

- **Step-down outcomes:** 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.
- **Contact with relatives:** 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.
- **Social support:** No differences in the level of social support between the treatment and control groups.
- **Placement changes:** For children referred prior to age 13, those in the treatment group experienced fewer placement changes than did those in the control group.
- **Negative impact on well-being:** Treatment group members were more likely to have 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.
- **Workforce:** 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.
- **Family contacts:** 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. 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.
- **Timing:** It took an average of just over a month (34 days from random assignment) for Family Finding workers to make a new contact discovery.