



Results from a family finding experiment



Miriam J. Landsman^{a,*}, Shamra Boel-Studt^a, Kelli Malone^b

^a University of Iowa, United States

^b Four Oaks, Iowa, United States

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to test the effectiveness of family-finding, a child welfare practice approach that provides intensive search and engagement efforts for children in foster care and their families with the objectives of strengthening family connections and permanency. We used an experimental design with randomization to family finding or a control group. The family finding approach was more effective than standard child welfare services in engaging a larger network of family and kin, in facilitating a greater number of family team meetings, and in ensuring that every child in care has at least one supportive emotional connection with an adult. Children receiving family finding were more likely to be adopted by relatives and less likely to age out of care without permanency resolution, but other forms of permanency, number of placement disruptions, and subsequent substantiated maltreatment reports did not differ between groups. As a method for strengthening family connections, the evidence in support of family finding is clear; as a mechanism for physical permanency resolution, mixed results from this experiment indicate a need for further research on family finding for specific permanency outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Connection to family has long been considered important in facilitating permanency for children in out of home care. This phenomenon has been identified for children in family foster care (Davis, Landsverk, Newton, & Ganger, 1996; Leathers, 2002) as well as institutional care (Hair, 2005; Landsman, Groza, Tyler, & Malone, 2001; Lee, 2011). The growing recognition of the value of family as a placement resource is realized in the increased use of kinship care, a placement setting in which family connection is embedded. Relative placements comprise 27% of out-of-home placements (U.S. DHHS, 2011), but as Geen and Duerr Berrick (2002) noted a decade ago, official statistics understate the actual use of family caregivers in child welfare. Furthermore, the surge in the use of family group conferencing/team decision-making in current child welfare practice further highlights the value attributed to engaging family and kin in planning for the welfare of children (Crampton & Jackson, 2007; Pennell, Edwards, & Burford, 2010; Raultis, McCarthy, Krackhardt, & Cahalane, 2010; Sheets et al., 2009).

This movement toward increased family connectedness during out of home placement has been further expanded by the *Fostering Connections to Success & Adoptions Act* (2008, Pub L. No. 110–351). State child welfare agencies are now required to identify and engage immediate and extended family members of children in foster care, notifying adult relatives of a child's placement within 30 days of removal and explaining how they

might become involved in the child's care. Recognizing the importance of sibling connections, there is now an expectation that siblings be placed together, or if not feasible, to ensure visitation rights similar to parents and children. To develop knowledge about approaches in strengthening family connections, the legislation authorized funding for four types of demonstration projects testing various models: kinship navigator, intensive family finding, family group decision making, and residential family treatment. The goal of intensive family finding is to identify, locate and engage family and informal supports in planning for children's permanency. In this paper we present the final results of an intensive family finding project funded from 2009 to 2012.

1.1. Intensive family finding

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Administration for Children and Families (2009) describes intensive family finding as an approach in helping children and youth who are in care or at risk of being placed in care to reconnect with their family members. Intensive family finding projects use search technologies, family engagement strategies and other ways of locating biological family members. After identifying these individuals, intensive family finding projects work toward reestablishing relationships and facilitating permanent placements with family for children in care.

Typically intensive family finding has focused on children who have been out of their homes for extended periods of time and who have lost connections with many of their family and kin (Children's Defense Fund, 2010). The assumption is that the longer that the children are in

* Corresponding author at: 351 North Hall, Iowa City, Iowa 52242, United States. Tel.: +1 319 335 4934.

E-mail address: miriam-landsman@uiowa.edu (M.J. Landsman).

out-of-home care, the more difficult it is to sustain connections with family and the higher the likelihood that children will age out of foster care without having a sufficient support network.

Despite the intuitive appeal of the intensive family finding approach, to date there is next to no published research regarding its effectiveness in achieving permanent connections and family focused placements. The published literature includes a description of the approach (Wentz & Beck, 2012) and a conceptual application of family finding crossing international borders (Northcott & Jeffries, 2012). However, aside from the one peer-reviewed publication of preliminary results from the first year of our experimental study (Landsman & Boel-Studt, 2011), the empirical literature on intensive family finding consists of non-peer-reviewed research briefs and final reports produced by other family finding projects (i.e., Allen, Malm, & Williams, 2011; Aultman-Bettridge & Selby, 2012; Bringewatt, Allen, & Williams, 2013; Maike, Benner, & Scarsella, 2012), and a newly produced cross-site evaluation of federally funded family connection grants, including several family finding projects (JBA, 2013). Although the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare (2012) acknowledges Family Finding as highly relevant to child welfare, they have been unable to provide an effectiveness rating for the program due to the paucity of rigorous published research. Our study represents one effort to build the evidence base around the strengths and limitations of intensive family finding.

1.2. Project site and target population

The Families for Iowa's Children (FIC) project was implemented by Four Oaks, one of Iowa's largest non-profit agencies serving children and families, in collaboration with the Iowa Department of Human Services (IDHS). FIC was designed to use search technologies and family-centered practices to reconnect children entering foster care with family members and natural supports to provide support during the reunification process, either for temporary placement or for potentially permanent placement in the event that reunification was ruled out. FIC was implemented in two IDHS Service Areas and both were a mixture of urban and rural communities. The Ames Service Area comprised 12 counties located in the central part of the state, and the Cedar Rapids Service Area included 14 counties located in the mid-southeastern part of the state. These two areas of the state were selected for their high rates of foster care placement and in particular, their disproportional use of placement for minority children.

Four Oaks had previously conducted a pilot project using family finding techniques for adolescents and teenagers who were expected to age out of care (Malone). For the current demonstration project, FIC elected to broaden the range of children served by intensive family finding to children ages 0–17 who were referred to the state's centralized foster care placement matching program managed by Four Oaks. In Iowa, IDHS has contracted with Four Oaks to manage all requests for foster care placements and placement changes through a centralized system (Iowa KidsNet). The expectation was that some children would be entering foster care for the first time; others would have been in foster care longer with less connection to parents or relatives; some might have serious and complex mental health or behavioral health issues with no family connections beyond their often overwhelmed parent(s); and some would be the more traditional population of older adolescents who are expected to age out of care with weak connections to parents or other significant adults. FIC sought to test family search and engagement with this more heterogeneous population than is typically served by family finding programs. The rationale was that search and engagement strategies would be beneficial to children in out of home care under a broad range of circumstances.

We note that because all children in the study were active child welfare cases, both the experimental and control groups received DHS case-work services and other therapeutic and supportive services based on individual needs. FIC services were viewed as an enhancement, not a

substitute for other child welfare services. In examining program effectiveness, the key question was whether the addition of this search and engagement component resulted in stronger engagement, permanency, and safety outcomes.

1.3. Description of the program model

The theory of change underlying family finding and engagement asserts that by focusing efforts on identifying and nurturing a natural support network for each child in care, meeting frequently to sustain a sense of urgency around permanency, providing opportunities for relationship-building, and providing post-placement support, this expanded support network will result in shorter time to permanency, a greater likelihood of permanent placement with family, and improved child safety.

Development of the FIC model was informed by previous work on intensive family finding, primarily the Family Search and Engagement model developed by Catholic Community Services of Western Washington and EMQ Children and Family Services (2008). CCSWW provided staff training and ongoing consultation throughout the demonstration project. FIC was conceptualized in five key components: Referral; Information Gathering, Documentation and Search and Identification; Contact, Assessment and Engagement; Family Ties; Transition to Family; and Documentation.

The goal of the Referral stage is to expedite family finding through a seamless randomization process, with quick turnaround times for approving and assigning cases. At the Information Gathering stage, the focus is on identifying and searching for all potential relatives and kin and creating an individualized team and a process for facilitating permanency. The Contact, Assessment and Engagement stage seeks to work with family and supports on relationship building and to prepare the child and family for successful visits with family. By the Family Ties stage, the emphasis is on transitioning decision-making to the family and strengthening plans for sustained family connection after case closure. Documentation represents the provision of ongoing feedback and continuous assessment of process and outcomes. Although these stages are presented as discrete and sequentially related, they occurred simultaneously and in an interrelated way. Since we are seeking to build the evidence base for a model with limited published literature, we provide an overview of the model components and practices in Table 1.

1.4. Purpose and research hypotheses

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the family finding and engagement intervention in achieving a specified set of short-term and intermediate outcomes. For definitional clarity, relational permanency refers to evidence of sustained, loving relationships with family and kin supports as described by Stott and Gustavsson (2010). Physical permanency refers to an outcome in which the child is living in a home intended to be lasting, whether through family relationships, adoption, or legal guardianship. We test the following hypotheses, of which the first two pertain to short-term outcomes and the remaining three to intermediate outcomes.

H1. Children/families receiving intensive family finding services will have a greater number of family team meetings than those receiving standard child welfare services alone.

H2. Children/families receiving intensive family finding services will have a larger number of family and informal supports engaged in service planning than those receiving standard child welfare services alone.

H3. Children/families receiving intensive family finding services will be more likely to achieve relational permanency than those receiving standard child welfare services alone.

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