



# Family Finding Evaluations: A Summary of Recent Findings

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## Overview

Each year, nearly 250,000 children are removed from the custody of their parents due to abuse or neglect. Typically, children stay in foster care for a brief period of time, during which the family completes a case plan of services targeted at rehabilitation and prevention of future child maltreatment. One factor that may facilitate a successful reunification of children with their parents—or failing that, provide an alternate route to permanency through adoption or guardianship—is children’s connections with extended family. However, because foster care frequently disrupts social connections, practitioners may need to take extra steps to help children maintain or re-establish these connections. One intervention that aims to do just that is Family Finding. The Family Finding model provides child welfare practitioners with intensive search and engagement techniques to identify family members and other adults close to a child in foster care, and to involve these adults in developing and carrying out a plan for the emotional and legal permanency of the child.<sup>1</sup>

This brief reviews the results from 13 evaluations of Family Finding that have been released over the past two years. Overall, the evidence available from the recent evaluations is not sufficient to conclude that Family Finding improves youth outcomes above and beyond existing, traditional services. At the same time, the evidence is not sufficient to conclude that Family Finding does not improve outcomes.

We identify three hypotheses regarding the lack of consistently positive impacts, which are not mutually exclusive, and explore the implications of each: 1) Family Finding may not have been completely and consistently implemented, 2) study parameters may not have been sufficient to detect impacts, and 3) assumptions regarding how intervention activities and outputs will result in outcomes are flawed.

Key findings from the eight experimental studies—which provide stronger evidence about program effectiveness than do the non-experimental studies—include the following:

- Three evaluations identified a positive impact on legal permanency. The only study to examine impacts on emotional permanency also identified a positive impact.
- The studies also examined impacts on outcomes that might precede permanency, such as foster care placement stability and case plan goals. However, the great variation in the outcomes examined and how they were defined prevent us from drawing over-arching conclusions about Family Finding’s effects on proximal outcomes.

Twelve of the studies examined factors that might have hindered or facilitated program success. Findings from these process studies are particularly valuable, given the inconsistent impacts observed in the experimental studies. Despite the fact that Family Finding generally did serve the targeted populations and succeeded in identifying relatives and kin, the studies indicate that the Family Finding model was not completely or consistently implemented in many sites. Factors that prevented program success, according to the evaluations, include:

- lack of stakeholder buy-in;
- negative organizational or worker attitudes or culture regarding children’s families of origin or the importance of permanency;
- difficult relationships between the Family Finding agency and the public agency;
- insufficient communication and collaboration across range of stakeholders; and
- capacity issues, such as caseload size or length of time a case was served.

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<sup>1</sup> Emotional permanency is achieved when a child has a permanent emotional connection to another individual. Legal permanency is achieved when a child has a permanent legal connection to another individual (e.g., through adoption or legal guardianship).

Not all of the sites experienced all of these barriers; in some, for example, a positive relationship between agencies facilitated program success. In addition, two sites experienced changes to organizational and jurisdictional policies and procedures that facilitated the implementation of Family Finding.

Due to the huge array of factors affecting human behavior, achieving sizeable impacts through social service interventions such as Family Finding is difficult and rare. Further, study parameters may not have been adequate to detect existing impacts. In this context, the fact that a few of the evaluations did find positive impacts is encouraging, yet many questions remain about the Family Finding theory of change, implementation, and outcomes. Because the approach is so compelling, it is important to assess the contrasting hypotheses and develop stronger or clearer approaches for the future.

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## Background

Over the past decade, federal and state legislation has encouraged the placement of children who are in foster care with relatives and, since 2008, federal law has required child welfare agencies to identify relatives when children enter foster care. Policies and practices pertaining to search and engagement techniques have arisen in conjunction with this increasing focus on placing children with relatives. In addition, anecdotal and non-experimental evidence suggests that such strategies have helped children who had been in out-of-home care for several years reconnect with and find permanent homes with extended family, which has contributed to their increasing popularity. One particular approach, Family Finding,<sup>2</sup> uses a six-stage model to find and engage relatives and other adults with a prior relationship to children in foster care, with the aim of increasing permanency options for children. (See text box for description of the model's stages and core tenets.)

### The Family Finding Model

#### Six stages:

1. *Discover* at least 40 family members and important people in the child's life.
2. *Engage* multiple family members and supportive adults through participation in a planning meeting.
3. *Plan* for the successful future of the child with the participation of family members.
4. Make *decisions* during family meetings that support the child's legal and emotional permanency.
5. *Evaluate* the permanency plans developed.
6. Provide *follow-up supports* to ensure the child and family can maintain the permanency plans.

#### Central beliefs and values:

- Knowledge of the whereabouts and well-being of family members is a basic human need essential for the restoration of dignity.
- Children need a sense of belonging and unconditional love for health, growth, and development.
- Loneliness causes suffering for children in foster care, as they lose contact with family members over time and with multiple placement moves.
- Even the best treatment modalities will not remedy emotional and behavioral difficulties when children are suffering from loneliness. Connection is a prerequisite to healing.
- The successful planning for the permanency and support for traumatized children relies on respectful, collaborative engagement with family members.
- Families, not government or private agencies, take care of children best.
- All individuals have 100 to 300 family members.
- Parents need connections and supports to provide adequate care for their children.
- Parents and families want the best for their children, even when factors interfere with their ability to provide it for them directly.

Government and private funding has facilitated not only the implementation of Family Finding programs, but also the evaluation of those interventions. Twelve recipients of Federal Family Connections Discretionary Grants have implemented family finding models and completed evaluations of the programs. Further, private funding enabled Child Trends to conduct evaluations of Family Finding in two additional sites.

To date, findings from rigorous evaluations of Family Finding have been mixed. Based on available evidence, it is not possible to conclude that the intervention improves outcomes above and beyond the effects of other available services, or to conclude that it is ineffective in improving outcomes. The present document summarizes the available evidence, focusing on recent experimental evaluations and process studies, and explores potential explanations for the mixed findings.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Other approaches include family meetings such as Family Group Decision Making and Family Team Meetings.

<sup>3</sup> In order to prepare this summary, we reviewed the final grant report for each site. Where noted, some additional findings not reported in the site-level final reports come from the cross-site summary report prepared by James Bell Associates (2013). The full reference for each report is provided at the end of this document.

## The Family Finding model

The Family Finding model, originally developed by Kevin Campbell and colleagues, was inspired by the family-tracing techniques used by agencies such as the Red Cross to find and reunite family members who had been separated by war, civil disturbance, or natural disaster. The model's goal is to increase options for children's legal and emotional permanency. *Legal permanency* may include adoption and guardianship, as well as reunification. *Emotional permanency* refers to establishing a life-long connection with an adult who will unconditionally support and maintain healthy contact with the child, beyond the age of 18.

Across the sites in which agencies have implemented and evaluated Family Finding, the design of the programs has varied. The majority of the programs used Kevin Campbell's model<sup>4</sup> and/or the Catholic Community Services of Western Washington model,<sup>5</sup> but others used the Extreme Recruitment model,<sup>6</sup> the Clark County, Nevada model,<sup>7</sup> or a blend of several of the models. (A summary of each site's model can be found in [Appendix Table A](#).) Most programs used a "specialized worker" to carry out Family Finding activities with a caseload of children. However, a few sites chose to train Family Finding coaches who did not carry a caseload of children, but who provided guidance to the case-carrying workers who directly implemented the Family Finding activities with children and families. The intervention was originally developed to serve children who had lingered in care for an extended period of time, but some of the evaluated interventions chose to target children at risk of entering, or newly entering, care. A few programs targeted both populations, with one site (Hawaii) developing a separate intervention to target each population.

Program staff across sites all received training on family finding, but the type of training varied. The two privately-funded programs received multiple trainings from the model developer throughout the evaluation period. It is our understanding that, at the time of the evaluations, extant training and documentation did not include explicit guidance on how to implement some of the latter components of the model, and none of the programs had been completely manualized.

The Family Finding programs operated within varying agency contexts. For example, within the federally-funded grant projects, some grantees received "combination" awards allowing for concurrent design and operation of other programs aimed at serving children in or at risk of entering foster care, as well as Family Finding. These other programs included Kinship Navigator, an intervention designed to support the needs of relatives or fictive kin caring for youth, and Family Group Decision Making, an approach that attempts to engage and empower key family members and stakeholders in the decision-making process through meetings facilitated by a trained moderator. Some grantees (in Maryland and South Carolina) implemented these programs as distinct projects with different target populations, while others (in Hawaii, California [Lilliput], and Oklahoma) developed an integrated services model. The

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<sup>4</sup> See: The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare. (No date.) Family Finding. <http://www.cebc4cw.org/program/family-finding/detailed>

<sup>5</sup> See: Catholic Community Services of Western Washington and EMQ Children & Family Services. (2008.) Available online at [http://www.ccsww.org/site/DocServer/Family\\_Search\\_and\\_Engagement\\_Guide\\_CCS-EMQ.pdf?docID=641](http://www.ccsww.org/site/DocServer/Family_Search_and_Engagement_Guide_CCS-EMQ.pdf?docID=641)

<sup>6</sup> See: The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare. (No date.) Extreme Recruitment. <http://www.cebc4cw.org/program/extreme-recruitment/detailed>

<sup>7</sup> See: Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2009 or 2010.) Available online at [https://library.childwelfare.gov/cwig/ws/library/docs/gateway/Record?rpp=10&upp=0&m=1&w=+NATIVE\(%27recno%3D72403%27\)&r=1](https://library.childwelfare.gov/cwig/ws/library/docs/gateway/Record?rpp=10&upp=0&m=1&w=+NATIVE(%27recno%3D72403%27)&r=1)

programs also varied in terms of the supports available (in particular, kinship guardianship subsidies) for relatives who were willing to provide a permanent placement for a child.

## Evaluation findings

Overall, thirteen evaluations of Family Finding have been carried out in recent years.<sup>8</sup> Of these, eight used experimental methods, meaning that study participants were randomly assigned either to receive Family Finding services (the treatment group) or to receive services as usual (the control group). With sufficiently large samples, the process of random assignment makes the treatment and control groups statistically equivalent, such that differences in observed outcomes between the two groups can be attributed to the intervention. These differences are referred to as “program impacts.” Because of the strength of evidence generated by the experimentally designed evaluations, we focus on their findings, although we summarize findings from all the studies in Table 1, and in greater detail in [Appendix Table B](#).<sup>9</sup> An important caveat to keep in mind, however, is that variation in the study methodologies makes synthesizing findings across these evaluations difficult. In particular, the studies varied in the outcomes they assessed and, even when similar constructs were examined across studies, in the definition and measurement of those constructs.

### Experimental findings

Overall, among studies in four sites testing programs serving a combined population of youth new to care and already in care, only one (Iowa’s study) identified favorable impacts on legal permanency. A favorable impact on emotional permanency also was found in the Iowa study, measured through use of a “relational permanency” construct based on case notes regarding the child’s contact and relationship with family members. No other studies examined emotional or relational permanency as an outcome.

Legal permanency was examined in three sites focusing on youth new to care and four sites focusing on youth already in care, with some favorable impacts and some null impacts identified. The type of placement setting was examined in all sites (with one exception), with just a few positive impacts identified across sites and populations. A mix of favorable, unfavorable, and null impacts was identified across sites for outcomes pertaining to foster care placement stability, length of foster care stay, case plan goals, and (examined in only one site) youth well-being. No impacts on safety (as assessed via maltreatment re-allegations) were identified.

In addition to legal and emotional permanency, the studies identified scattered positive impacts on outcomes that might precede permanency, including foster care placement settings, case goals, and foster care status. A few negative impacts were also identified (on foster care status, foster care placement stability, and case plan goals), and the sole evaluation that examined impacts on well-being found treatment group youth more likely to exhibit internalizing behavior problems than control group youth. A few evaluations also assessed program outputs, generally finding positive impacts on the identification and/or engagement of connections. However, the evaluations varied to an even greater degree in the selection and definition of these shorter-term outcomes than they did in their

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<sup>8</sup> In addition to the 13 evaluations summarized in this report, International Social Services USA Branch was awarded a Family Connections grant to implement a family finding intervention. Due to its international focus, we have chosen not to include it in our summary of findings.

<sup>9</sup> Note that the descriptions and methods pertain to the portions of the evaluations focusing only on Family Finding. For example, if a Kinship Navigator program and a Family Finding program were evaluated in a given site, but only the former was experimentally evaluated, then the evaluation is described in Table 1 as not being experimental.

specification of the permanency outcomes. This variation makes it difficult to compare the effectiveness of the interventions across sites. See [Appendix Table B](#) for detailed information.

The sizes of the impacts were typically substantial across the studies, with differences of 10 percentage points or more between the treatment and control groups. However, this is likely a function of sample size. Most of the studies lacked the power to detect small differences; accordingly, the confidence intervals around estimates are likely sizeable (that is, the precision of the estimates is not high). For this reason, we avoid a discussion of the sizes of the impacts, although interested readers can find the specific point estimates reported in [Appendix Table B](#).

In summary, given the lack of consistency in positive impacts identified across evaluations, as well as the lack of consistency in which specific outcomes were operationalized, findings can best be described as mixed, although it is important to note that negative impacts were rare.

### Non-experimental findings

In non-experimental studies that do not employ random assignment to form comparison groups, it is difficult to know whether differences in outcomes are due to the intervention, or due to some other systematic difference between groups. Additionally, in non-experimental studies that examine change in the intervention group over time, but that lack a comparison group, it is difficult to estimate what change might have occurred in the absence of the intervention. Given these caveats, the evaluations with non-experimental designs generally found favorable outcomes. All programs made progress in finding permanent placements for the children served. In one site serving new entries into out-of-home care, the use of kinship placements within 24 hours increased from 17 to 42 percent. In addition, across all the experimental evaluations, non-experimental analyses indicated that the number of family members discovered and engaged for the treatment group increased considerably between baseline and follow up.

### Process studies

Given the lack of consistently positive outcomes across the evaluations of Family Finding, it is worth exploring whether the evaluations included additional information that might provide insight into possible reasons for program success or the lack thereof. Fortunately, all of the experimental and non-experimental evaluations were accompanied by process studies. In the process studies, the evaluators examined how the program was implemented in each site. Further, all but Washington's include a description of barriers and facilitators to program implementation. (See [Appendix Table C](#).) We organized the barriers and facilitators by the level at which they occur—child, family, Family Finding agency/worker, public agency, court, intervention model, and other. Given the variation in contexts within which the programs were implemented, barriers and facilitators present in some sites were not reported in other sites. Further, some studies identified facilitators that might have acted to ameliorate barriers identified in other studies.

A general theme found across levels and across studies was the importance of *stakeholder buy-in* for achieving intended outcomes. Buy-in on the part of the youth and family affected implementation in some sites. Three studies noted that youth resistance to participation was a barrier; one of these observed that some youth felt they already had enough connections. Four studies found that family were often reluctant to become involved. In one study, birth parent resistance to involving family members was cited as a particular barrier. Studies identified several facilitators that may promote cooperation from families, including aspects of the model that empower family members (two studies),

Family Finding workers who have positive relationships and are available to families (one study), and having assistance from a parent advocate (one study). A lack of buy-in to the intervention on the part of the public agency (three studies) and courts (two studies) was also problematic. Two studies described a lack of cooperation in activities necessary for Family Finding from the public agency. In other studies, conversely, the fact that public agency caseworker (two studies) and public agency administrator did exhibit buy-in (three studies) was noted as a facilitator.

Two studies identified *confusion about Family Finding* as a barrier; one identified confusion among family members, and another found the same among the public agency. A factor that might ameliorate confusion is the ability to convene family conferences. In one site, researchers found that family conferences helped all parties involved understand their roles and the available services.

Multiple studies found that *organizational and worker attitudes and culture* in two general areas—children’s families of origin and the importance of permanency—affected program success. Specifically, studies identified, as a barrier, culture favoring permanent placements over enduring connections in the Family Finding agency (one study) and in the public agency (two studies). In addition, public agency culture favoring limited family engagement and a bias against relatives (four studies), a bias against fathers in particular (one study), and culture favoring placement stability (three studies) were all reported as barriers. Conversely, three studies identified agency culture favoring family involvement as a facilitator.

The *cross-organization relationship* between the Family Finding agency/workers and the public agency/workers—and related factors—were cited in multiple studies as affecting program success. Specifically, one study identified the difficult relationship between the workers in the Family Finding agency and the public agency as a barrier. Two studies highlighted a lack in communication with and education of caseworkers and courts regarding Family Finding as problematic. Conversely, three studies cited the positive relationship between the Family Finding agency and the public agency as a facilitator, with one identifying the co-location of the two agencies as a facilitator. Another found that a pre-existing relationship between the agencies and staff promoted program success.

Some strategies pertaining to the *communication and collaboration across types of stakeholders* that may have affected program success included identification and engagement of key partners early on (two studies), as well as the presence of a child welfare liaison (one study). Other facilitators included having implementation team meetings with the Family Finding and public agency staff (two studies), soliciting input from all stakeholders to address problems (two studies), and establishing a diverse, multidisciplinary board (one study).

*Capacity issues* on the part of the Family Finding agency and other organizations also affected implementation in some sites. During the service period, some Family Finding agencies experienced staff vacancies and turnover (two studies), large geographic areas that required extensive travel time (one study), and difficulty using internet search tools (two studies). One study also found that the Family Finding caseload size was too large. In the public agency, some sites were challenged by caseworker burden and overload (three studies), budget cuts and staff layoffs (one study), and staff turnover (one study). Delays with terminations of parental rights (TPRs) were problematic as well (two studies). Conversely, resources that seemed to facilitate implementation include having dedicated Family Finding specialists (four studies), the availability of a specialist to assist with searches (one study), and permanency supports such as a coordinated service team and permanency consultants (one study).



*Organizational and jurisdictional policies and procedures* were also sometimes cited as affecting program success. Two studies found that policy and procedural changes in the public agency facilitated Family Finding. One evaluation identified interstate issues and restrictive congregate care center policies as barriers.

Certain *features of the Family Finding models* themselves—as implemented in the project sites—were also identified either as facilitators or barriers. Four studies pointed to the service period’s being too short as a barrier to success; similarly, one additional study indicated that a lack of urgency to find connections on the part of the Family Finding workers was a barrier in light of the short case length. Other barriers pertained to capacity issues, including caseload burden and too little time devoted to building relationships with connections (one study), as well as challenges with transitioning the case from the Family Finding worker to the regular caseworker once the Family Finding case was closed (one study). Additionally, insufficient training on how to implement model components was identified as a barrier in one study, while another found that guidance from a Family Finding coach was helpful. Other model-related facilitators pertained to strategies for identifying and engaging connections, such as family Team Meetings and specific search strategies.

One study explicitly noted the availability of *concrete resources and supports* for kin as a facilitator, and in two studies, the availability of community programs and resources were helpful. Conversely, a lack of guardianship subsidies or limited support resources for relatives was found to be a barrier in two studies.

## Discussion

Overall, the findings from the non-experimental evaluations tend to be positive; however, findings from the more rigorous experimental evaluations are not conclusive when considered in the aggregate. While disheartening, this pattern of positive non-experimental findings followed by a lack of experimental impacts found in experimental studies is common in social service research. Overall, only one experimental study (the Iowa study) examined impacts both on legal and emotional permanency, and that evaluation identified positive impacts. In that same site, the evaluation also identified positive impacts on having a relative placement as the last foster care setting, and on the engagement of connections. Treatment group youth in Iowa had slightly longer stays in foster care, however. No other studies identified positive impacts on legal permanency (though treatment group youth in one other program serving youth new to care and already in care, may have had an increased likelihood of achieving permanency). Otherwise, however, findings are mixed. The pattern of findings is no clearer when looking separately at evaluations of programs serving youth new to care, or when focusing on evaluations of programs serving youth already in care. In sum, evidence from the rigorous evaluations is not sufficient to conclude that Family Finding models are attaining intended goals.

As noted above, the interventions varied in terms of the specific models implemented, in the contexts in which the programs were administered, and in the populations targeted and served. The variation in the training that each site received, as well as a lack of thorough manualization (among other factors), resulted in additional implementation variation across programs using Kevin Campbell’s or other models for family engagement. This variation leads to a lack of comparability of the evaluations across multiple dimensions, which complicates our ability to draw overarching conclusions about the effectiveness of Family Finding. It is difficult to know whether positive impacts were not identified in some sites or on some outcomes due to the specific model, context, and/or population served, or for some other reason. Furthermore, many outcomes examined were unique to single evaluations, or were examined in only a

few evaluations. The wide variation in the definition of outcome measures provides little evidence about the consistency, or lack thereof, of impacts on specific outcomes across sites. Additionally, sample sizes and follow-up times varied across evaluations. Therefore, while the evidence is not sufficient to conclude that Family Finding works, neither is it sufficient to conclude that Family Finding does not work. Acknowledging these limitations, below we describe explanations for the inconsistency of the evaluations in identifying positive impacts on outcomes.

### **1. The program model was not completely and consistently implemented.**

Program impacts may not have been as favorable as expected if children served by Family Finding did not receive the full complement of services. Indeed, two latter components—evaluating permanency plans and providing follow-up supports—were not implemented in many of the evaluation sites. Based on our review, implementation appeared hindered by cross-organization collaboration challenges, insufficient training and documentation on how to carry out program tasks, and reunification time frames.

The necessity of collaboration across workers and organizations (including not only the Family Finding agencies and the public agencies, but also the courts) adds a layer of complexity to model implementation. The discovery and engagement components rely less on collaboration and may have been better suited to the specialized worker type of staffing structure. However, the latter components of the model generally require more collaboration. In most of the sites, after the specialized Family Finding worker scheduled and convened family meetings, responsibility shifted to the child’s worker for maintaining the child-family connections and for moving ahead with permanency plans developed at the family meetings. This transition in responsibility did not appear to occur with any regularity, and was cited in one process study as a barrier to program success. Lengthening the service period, and allowing the Family Finding worker to stay on the case longer, might make implementation of the latter components of the model more possible.

Another commonly-reported factor was the need for positive cross-organization relationships. Positive relationships, along with factors that promote such relationships (e.g., co-location of agencies), facilitate communication that could reduce confusion about the intervention. In contrast, organizational capacity issues might hamper communication between agencies, resulting not only in a lack of understanding of the Family Finding model, but perhaps also hampering the cross-organizational relationships—particularly if already-burdened public agency workers feel that the intervention is adding to their responsibilities. And indeed, organizational capacity issues were problematic in some sites.

Adopting strategies to promote communication and collaboration across various types of stakeholders may enhance stakeholder buy-in. In particular, when activities require collaboration between the specialized worker and public agency caseworker, or more broadly between two organizations, program success likely depends on clearly defined program activities and clearly assigned roles and responsibilities. In addition, organizational contexts must be amenable to the implementation of intervention activities, and if not, strategies are needed to modify the context.

On a different note, the Family Finding model had not been consistently manualized at the time of the evaluation, and the amount and type of training for program staff on how to carry out model components varied. Program staff must understand how to carry out Family Finding tasks in order to implement activities with fidelity to the model. A lack of consistent and thorough documentation or

training may have left staff unclear about how to carry out program tasks; however, the need for additional training and instruction was not identified in many studies as affecting program success.

**Agencies implementing Family Finding should emphasize complete and consistent implementation of the model, since failure to do so may diminish impact. Factors that might facilitate implementation include:**

- implementing a complete version of the Family Finding model, especially the final two steps of the model, requiring lengthened time for Family Finding workers to serve each case;
- ensuring positive cross-organizational relationships if a private agency Family Finding worker program structure is implemented; and
- manualization of the Family Finding model and improved training and documentation of how to carry out activities for each step, and including fidelity measures so researchers can identify whether the model has been implemented fully and consistently.

## 2. The study parameters may have been inadequate to detect existing positive impacts.

Some effects may have been too small to be statistically significant given sample sizes. Some outcomes may be less malleable than others and require a longer period of time in which to detect a change. If so, the follow-up period of time in which to observe resulting permanency outcomes could have been too short. Also, the array of outcomes examined varied widely across studies. Programs may have achieved impacts on outcomes that were omitted from the evaluations. Emotional permanency, along with legal permanency, is a key goal for Family Finding, yet only one study examined impacts on emotional permanency. Another outstanding question is whether Family Finding functions differently in different populations of children. Parameters for program eligibility varied across sites; the most notable difference was whether a program served children new to care, languishing in care, or both. In some sites serving diverse populations, the samples size was not sufficient to test whether impacts differed across subgroups of children served.

**Future evaluations could benefit from modified study parameters. Changes that might facilitate detection of impacts include:**

- increasing the sample sizes;
- measuring key long-term outcomes, especially both emotional and legal permanency, and extending the follow-up times to detect impacts that take longer to occur, as well as more proximal short-term outcomes, such as placement settings and case goals;
- increasing the comparability of study designs (including the consistency of outcome measures examined across studies) to allow for meta-analysis or to facilitate synthesis of findings across studies; and
- stratifying random assignment by important youth and case characteristics so that subgroup impacts can be examined.

## 3. Hypotheses about how program activities and outputs affect youth outcomes may be flawed.

One of the rationales for specialized relative search and engagement is the expectation that methodically identifying and engaging a large number of extended family members will increase the chances for children and youth to live with relatives and achieve permanency. This approach contrasts with what typically occurs at public child welfare agencies, where social workers often define family narrowly and assess only one or two easily-identified relatives. The training that Family Finding workers received guided them to discover at least 40 family members and to interact with or engage six family members in the Family Finding activities. The assumption is that identifying a large number of relatives will result both in a larger support network for the youth, and also a larger number of possible permanency resources. Yet it is possible that identifying one or a few “high-quality” connections, rather than identifying a large number of connections, is critical for program success. If valid, this alternative

assumption might call for spending less time on identifying numerous connections, and more time spent trying to engage and build relationships with the most promising connections.

In addition, newly-discovered family members with no prior connection to the child might not feel compelled to become involved. Indeed, multiple process studies identified family resistance to becoming involved, as well as lack of follow-through on the part of family members, as barriers. Alternatively, while some connections discovered during the intervention may have lacked the motivation to help the child, others may have lacked the resources and/or capacity to help. Consistent with this notion, a barrier identified in several studies was a lack of concrete supports for relatives, such as guardianship subsidies; conversely, community programs and resources were identified as facilitators in one study. If additional resources were available, some known or newly-discovered connections might be willing to serve as permanency supports for children.

A third assumption is that Family Finding works for older youth. In several sites, older youth were provided the services, but many aged out of care within the evaluation period. As noted previously, some studies found that youth felt they already had enough connections, or that youth were resistant to Family Finding. Perhaps a different set of strategies, or modified strategies, are necessary for older youth.

A fourth assumption is that the successful planning for permanency and support for children with trauma histories relies on respectful, collaborative engagement with family members. The importance of acknowledging trauma histories is borne out by the fact that a barrier identified across many studies was the presence of traumatic histories for families and youth. Such trauma histories were sometimes responsible for the reluctance of youth and families to become engaged and presented difficulties when convening meetings with multiple family members, and workers sometimes found it challenging to deal with sensitive family issues. Perhaps respectful, collaborative engagement is necessary, but not sufficient, in the presence of trauma. The model may be more effective if it is refined in a way that promotes program staff's ability to navigate sensitive issues with family members, such as by incorporating a therapeutic element.

A fifth assumption is that Family Finding can be implemented as a discrete intervention. A competing assumption, however, is that the approach is a philosophy that could guide all casework with children in foster care. Recent federal legislation has, at least to some degree, required that family search and engagement activities be included in routine casework for children who enter foster care.<sup>10</sup> However, the enthusiasm with which relative search and engagement is carried out likely depends on agency and caseworker culture and buy-in—that is, on their philosophy regarding casework with children in foster care and these children's families. As noted previously, stakeholder buy-in was identified as a factor affecting program success in multiple studies. Regardless of the specific model or practices employed across agencies, an overarching philosophy that favors the Family Finding tenets of valuing family-centered practice may result in greater success in family search and engagement, while a rejection of those tenets may cause agencies and workers to take a very narrow view of family and expend less effort in family search and engagement.

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<sup>10</sup> The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 aims to increase relative placements for youth by requiring that agencies notify relatives when children are placed in foster care, clarifying that states can waive non-safety related licensing standards in order to place children with relatives if appropriate, and giving states the option to use Title IV-E funds to subsidize kinship guardians intending to serve as permanent placements for youth.

Lastly, a sixth assumption is that it is possible to improve over outcomes achieved under services-as-usual. Inherent in this assumption are two tenets: legal and emotional permanency are malleable—that is, they can be changed—and the intervention provides services that are different from what is typically provided.

***Assumptions about how program activities and outputs affect youth outcomes within the population served should be closely examined. Questions for the field include the following:***

- Is the quality of the connections more important to relative search and engagement than the number of connections?
- Do relatives who have the motivation to serve as resources for youth face barriers that prevent them from doing so?
- Are modified strategies needed for programs to serve older children, for whom there is a shorter period of time in which to intervene before they age out?
- Are modified strategies needed for programs to navigate traumatic family histories?
- Can Family Finding be implemented as a discrete intervention? Or is it a philosophy that needs to overlay the work of all stakeholders involved with youth in foster care in order for the goals of Family Finding to be achieved?
- Can legal and/or emotional permanency be achieved for all youth?

## Concluding remarks

The evaluations highlighted in this review yield some evidence that is consistent with practitioners' and program developers' expectations about how Family Finding works, but also some evidence that is not. In general, the evaluations found that the interventions served the intended populations. In addition, the intervention did succeed in identifying and engaging relatives and kin of children and youth in the various program sites. In most of the experimental evaluations, the intervention was not found to have a positive impact on children's permanency outcomes; however, the evaluations rarely found negative impacts and did not find negative impacts on key outcomes. The available evidence is not sufficient to conclude that Family Finding improves youth outcomes above and beyond alternative services in place. At the same time, the evidence is not sufficient to conclude that Family Finding does not improve outcomes. Due to the huge array of factors affecting human behavior, achieving sizeable impacts through social service interventions such as Family Finding is difficult and rare. Alternatively or additionally, it is possible that the model was not completely or consistently implemented across sites.

Also, as noted, study parameters may not have been adequate to detect existing impacts. In this context, the fact that a few of the evaluations did find positive impacts is encouraging. However, it is also possible that the assumptions driving the design of the intervention are flawed; if so, revisions may be necessary in order to achieve impacts.

Thus, many questions remain about the Family Finding theory of change, implementation, and outcomes. Because the approach is so compelling, it is important to assess the contrasting hypotheses and develop stronger or clearer approaches for the future.

**Table 1.a. Experimental evaluations of Family Finding**

Experimental Evaluations			
Staffing Structure	Target Population	Sample Size	Major Findings
Children’s Services Society of Wisconsin (WI)			
Specialized	In-care and new entries	T=83 C=92	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No impact                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Discharge to permanency, discharge from foster care</li> <li>○ Placement with relatives</li> <li>○ Placement changes</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Favorable impact                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Months in foster care (T=12.9, C=13.5, p&lt;.05)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Unfavorable impact                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Case goal of independent living (T=5%, C=4%, p&lt;.10)</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><u>Among subgroup of youth already in care:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Favorable impact                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Discharge from foster care (T=31%, C=13%, p&lt;.10)</li> <li>○ Case goal of transfer of guardianship (T=25%, C=10%, p&lt;.10)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Unfavorable impact                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ No placement changes: (T=38%, C=67%, p&lt;.05)</li> <li>○ Case goal of placement with a relative (T=0%, C=13%, p&lt;.05)</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><u>Among subgroup of youth new to care:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Favorable impact                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Foster care placement with relative (T=23%, C=8%, p&lt;.10)</li> <li>○ No placement changes (T=66%, C=43%, p&lt;.10)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Kids Central (FL)			
Other - Coaching for Caseworker	In care and new entries	<p><u>Site 1:</u> T=308, C=246</p> <p><u>Site 2:</u> T=88, C=30</p> <p>Note: units, not children, were randomly assigned</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No impact                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Discharge to permanency, discharge to reunification</li> <li>○ Foster care placement with siblings</li> <li>○ Placement stability after foster care discharge</li> <li>○ Length of foster care stay</li> <li>○ Case plan goal of permanency</li> <li>○ Substantiated maltreatment re-allegation</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Favorable impact (<i>level of statistical significance not noted</i>)                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Placement with relatives considered at case closure (T=58%, C=0%, 1 site only)</li> <li>○ Increased # of connections ( site 1: T=80%, C=51%; site 2: T=98%, C=17)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Children’s Home Society (NC)			
Specialized	In care	<p><u>Full sample</u> T=267 C=265</p> <p><u>≥ age 13 @ enrollment @ 12 months:</u> T=143, C=162</p> <p><u>@ 24 months:</u> T=132, C=149</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No impact                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Placement step-down</li> <li>○ Discharge to permanency, to reunification, or to a relative</li> <li>○ Foster care placement with relative</li> <li>○ Case plan goal of relative adoption/guardianship or reunification</li> <li>○ Number of placement changes or number of disrupted placements</li> <li>○ Maltreatment re-allegation</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><u>Among subgroup of youth ≥ age 13 at time of study enrollment</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No impact                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Youth has own children</li> <li>○ Social support, self-efficacy, assets</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Material hardships Favorable impact                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Living arrangement @ 12 months (Kin or adoptive/biological parents: T=30%, C=20%, p&lt;.10; Non-kin foster home: T=40%, C=54%, p&lt;.05)</li> <li>○ Contact with various relatives @ 12 months (≥ monthly contact w/ grandparent: T=47%, C=37%, p&lt;.05; &lt; monthly contact w/ sibling: T=10%, C=6%, p&lt;.10; ≥ monthly contact w/ other relative: T=47%, C=33%, p&lt;.05; close with grandparent: T=52%, C=42%, p&lt;.10); most impacts dissipated @ 24 months</li> <li>○ Savings account @ 12 months (T=28%, C=22%, p&lt;.05)</li> <li>○ General equivalency degree @ 24 months (T=8%, C=5%, p&lt;.05)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Unfavorable impact:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Internalizing behavior problems @ 24 months (T=16%,C=6%, &lt;.01)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Experimental Evaluations			
Staffing Structure	Target Population	Sample Size	Major Findings
Four Oaks (IA)			
Specialized	In care and new entries	T=125 C=118	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No impact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Mean # placements</li> <li>○ Maltreatment re-allegations</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Favorable impact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Relational permanency (T=81%, C=65%, p&lt;.01)</li> <li>○ Discharge to reunification (T=12%, C=5%, p&lt;.10)</li> <li>○ Foster care placement with relatives (T=18%, C=9%, p&lt;.10)</li> <li>○ Mean # connections involved in case (T=11.7, C=4.2, p&lt;.01)</li> <li>○ Mean # family team meetings (T=4.0, C=1.2, p&lt;.01)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Unfavorable impact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Mean months in care (T=15.5, C=13.1, p&lt;.05); impact becomes non-significant when time in care with relatives is not counted</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Seneca Center for Children and Families (San Francisco, CA)			
Specialized	New entries	T=116 C=123	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No impact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Discharge to reunification</li> <li>○ Foster care placement with a relative</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Favorable impact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ No placement changes (T=50%, C=33%, p&lt;.10)</li> <li>○ Discharge from foster care (T=83%, C=70%, p&lt;.10)</li> <li>○ Case plan goal of reunification (T=66%, C=47%, p&lt;.05)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Rhode Island Foster Parent Association (RI)			
Other - Specialized worked with caseworker	In care and new entries	T=416 C=467	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No impact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Discharge to reunification</li> <li>○ Placement with relatives</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Favorable impact: Any placement changes: T=81%, C=9%, p&lt;.05</li> </ul>
Maryland Department of Human Resources (MD)			
Specialized (Discovery and some engagement activities)	In care in 2 counties, with goal of APPLA	T=77 C=55	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No impact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Foster care placement setting type</li> <li>○ Mean number of placements, length of stay in foster care</li> <li>○ Discharge from foster care</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Unfavorable impact: Case goal of independent living (T=68%, C=52%, p&lt;.10)</li> </ul>
Hawaii Department of Human Services (HI)			
Specialized	In care and new entries	<u>In care</u> T=120 C=120 (N of families)  <u>New to care</u> T=109 C=235	<u>Among youth already in care</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No apparent impact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Discharge to reunification</li> <li>○ Permanency being in process</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Possible favorable impact (<i>statistical significance not indicated in report</i>) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Permanency established (T=24%, C=16%)</li> <li>○ Mean # of connections at 6 months (T=46, C=25) and 12 months (T=49, C=26)</li> <li>○ Mean # of relatives willing to be involved at 6 months (T=16, C=6) and 12 months (T=19, C=6)</li> <li>○ Discharge from foster care (T=69%, C=60%)</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <u>Among youth new to care</u> † <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possible favorable impact (<i>statistical significance not indicated in report</i>) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Avoiding entry into foster care</li> <li>○ Discharge to reunification (T=72%, C=66%)</li> <li>○ Mean months in care (T=18.8, C=21.3 months)</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>†The sample included youth at risk of entering care, so findings pertaining to youth in care represent a non-experimental subgroup. Hawaii's final report does not include the mean number of months in care nor the percentages entering foster care. Point estimates for months in care were obtained from the cross-site report (James Bell Associates, 2013)</p>

**Table 1.b. Non-experimental evaluations of Family Finding**

Non-Experimental Evaluations				
Staffing Structure	Target Population	Evaluation Design	Sample Size	Major Findings
<b>Catholic Family and Child Service (WA)</b>				
Specialized	In care and new entries	Outcomes for served group	N=258	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mean number of connections contacted: 7.4</li> <li>• 46% discharged from foster care</li> <li>• 31% placed temporarily with relatives/supportive adults</li> <li>• 27% of children with closed FF cases were in a relative/kin placement intended to become permanent</li> <li>• 77% of all children served made positive engagement with relative, kin or other supportive adult</li> <li>• 40% achieved permanency</li> <li>• 12% still in care, in process of reunification; 9% still in care, case goal related to permanency but no resource identified; 4% still in care, case goal not related to legal permanency</li> </ul>
<b>Lilliput Children’s Services (CA)</b>				
Specialized	New entries	Pre-Post	N=211	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 99.5% had at least one connection engaged</li> <li>• Mean number of connections engaged: 4.7</li> <li>• Initial and last foster care placement setting: congregate care (pre: 23%, post: 3%), foster parents (pre: 73%, post: 44%), kin caregivers (pre: 4%, post: 41%), parents (pre: 0%, post: 12%)</li> <li>• 6% adopted, 28% reunified, 44% living with relatives kin</li> </ul>
<b>Maine Department of Health and Human Services (ME)</b>				
Other - Partnering agency staff/ Extreme Recruitment model	In care	Outcomes for served group	N=200	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mean number of connections: 31.5</li> <li>• Last foster care placement setting: 30% congregate care, 46% foster parents, 9% parents, 2% adoptive placement, 5% independent living, 6% other</li> <li>• Permanency outcomes: 4% adopted, 4% reunified, 3% guardianship, 14% emancipated, 75% remained in foster care</li> </ul>
<b>Oklahoma Department of Human Services (OK)</b>				
Specialized	New entries	Comparison group	N=5,720	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First placement after removal: Relatives (T=37%, C=24%), Emergency foster care (T=12%, C=16%), reunification (T=12%, C=27%, regular/therapeutic foster care, congregate/institutional care, detention, AWOL (T=40%, C=33%)</li> <li>• Timing of first placement after removal: &lt; 24 hours (T=25%, C=14%), 24-120 hours (T=33%, C=26%) &gt;120 hours (T=42%, C=61%)</li> <li>• Timing of first placement after removal and placement is relative: &lt;24 hours (T=10%, C=2%), 24-120 hours (T=14%, C=6%), &gt;120 hours (T=13%, C=16%)</li> <li>• 0% or &lt;1% substantiated maltreatment in treatment or comparison group</li> </ul>
<b>South Carolina Department of Social Services (SC)</b>				
Other - specialized - GALs	In care	Pre-Post	N=322	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of connections discovered: 329</li> <li>• Number of connections contacted: 390</li> <li>• Number of connections engaged: 71</li> </ul>



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## **Appendix**

Full appendix can be found online at <https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Family-Finding-Evaluations-Appendix.pdf>.